

todd marcus • inheritance

1. **The Adventures of Kang and Kodos** 7:09
2. **Herod (Part I)** 2:44
3. **Herod (Part 2)** 8:17
4. **Bye Bye Blackbird** 7:47
5. **Herod (Reflections)** 2:15
6. **Wahsouli** 6:55
7. **Solstice** 9:15
8. **Epistrophy** 5:00
9. **Blues for Tahrir** 9:10
10. **Inheritance** 7:50

Todd Marcus, bass clarinet (1-4, 6-8, 10), clarinet (5, 9)
Don Byron, clarinet (2-3, 7)
Xavier Davis, piano (2-3, 5-8)
Eric Kennedy drums (2-3, 5-8)
Eric Wheeler, bass (all)
George Colligan, piano (1, 4, 9-10)
Warren Wolf, drums (1, 4, 9-10)
Jon Seligman, percussion (9)

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george colligan
xavier davis
eric wheeler
eric kennedy
warren wolf
jon seligman

special guest don byron

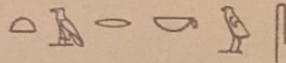


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The word “inheritance” means a number of things, but in jazz we can safely assume we’re not talking about money. No, jazz is about weightier, more spiritual stuff. It’s about the examples of excellence handed down by jazz masters, and meeting the challenges set by their discipline and genius. But it’s also about being an individual: not just repeating what’s been done, but expanding on the tradition, drawing on the particularities of one’s own viewpoint and background.

Todd Marcus, a resident of rough-and-tumble Baltimore, is a bass clarinet specialist and thus a nonconformist from the outset. In *Pursuit of the 9th Man*, his 2006 debut release for nonet, proved that he’s not only a gifted composer/arranger, but also a fiery soloist on an instrument best described as an underdog. “That’s been my quest, to take the instrument and try to chart some new territory,” Marcus says, noting the bass clarinet’s more usual role as an orchestral color, a “softer double or an avant-garde free horn.”

With *Inheritance*, Marcus’s sophomore effort,

we hear the bass clarinet swing and burn in a modern mainstream quartet setting. The agility and consistency of Marcus’s line playing catches one’s attention: “Because of the horn’s challenges of volume and projection,” he says, “you don’t hear folks taking it at higher tempos, playing louder and with more power and force. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to lead off with ‘The Adventures of Kang and Kodos,’ to demonstrate what I’ve been able to do on the instrument.”

This opening C minor blues romp captures Marcus’s more playful side, taking its title from two recurring characters on *The Simpsons* – “these green aliens with a glass dome over their single eyeball,” Marcus explains. The tune summons a rousing performance from George Colligan on piano, Eric Wheeler on bass and Warren Wolf, better known as a monster vibraphonist, on drums. But this is just one of two quartet lineups Marcus employs on *Inheritance*; the other features Wheeler again with pianist Xavier Davis and drummer Eric Kennedy.



“There are different qualities in my music,” Marcus notes. “On the one hand, with bass clarinet there’s definitely an opportunity to explore that softer side, and compositionally that’s a big part of what I like to do. On the flip side, a lot of my passion is for the more driving, high-energy kind of material. The quartet with Xavier and Eric Kennedy does a great job probing the more introspective stuff. The one with Warren and George really has that bounce and beautiful energy to it. It’s great as a horn player to have that fullness just surround you, and you can dig in.”

Another unique thing about Todd Marcus: he’s half-Egyptian on his father’s side, with a number of relatives still based in Cairo and Alexandria. The subtle Middle Eastern tinges in “Herod,” “Wahsouli” and “Blues for Tahrir” are no accident. Marcus has investigated Middle Eastern music and his dual heritage in a variety of ways, and he’s paid close attention to the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring and the post-Mubarak era in his father’s homeland.

With “Herod” he alludes to biblical times,

opening with a stormy rubato introduction and segueing to a beautifully orchestrated feature for himself alongside clarinet great and special guest Don Byron.

“There were a couple of tunes that called for a second voice, and I thought it’d be meaningful for me to have someone in the clarinet family,” says Marcus. “I’ve known Don over the years and he’s been such an inspiration for me, a major example of someone using the clarinet in modern contexts. We’ve done a few dates since the recording and we have some more coming up. It’s been special and it’s meant a lot to me.” The fact that both George Colligan and Xavier Davis have worked with Byron at various times made the match all the more comfortable. Byron returns for the extraordinary “Solstice,” which starts as a simple ballad and grows into a passionate multi-section epic.

“Wahsouli,” which translates from Arabic as “my arrival,” shifts from a driving Tyner-esque modal groove to ultra-fast 4/4 swing, again reflecting Marcus’s interest in Middle Eastern tonalities. “Middle Eastern music involves a



lot of unison playing,” he says, “and if you try to switch it up and inject more Western-type harmony, you risk losing that Middle Eastern feel. For me the question has been how to merge jazz harmony and still retain the Middle Eastern identity. ‘Wahsouli’ was one of the first pieces where I felt I’d achieved that. When my aunt and uncle from Cairo were visiting, I played this tune for them, and at one point in the third theme in the piece, we came to the melody and my aunt started singing along. It was an exciting moment.”

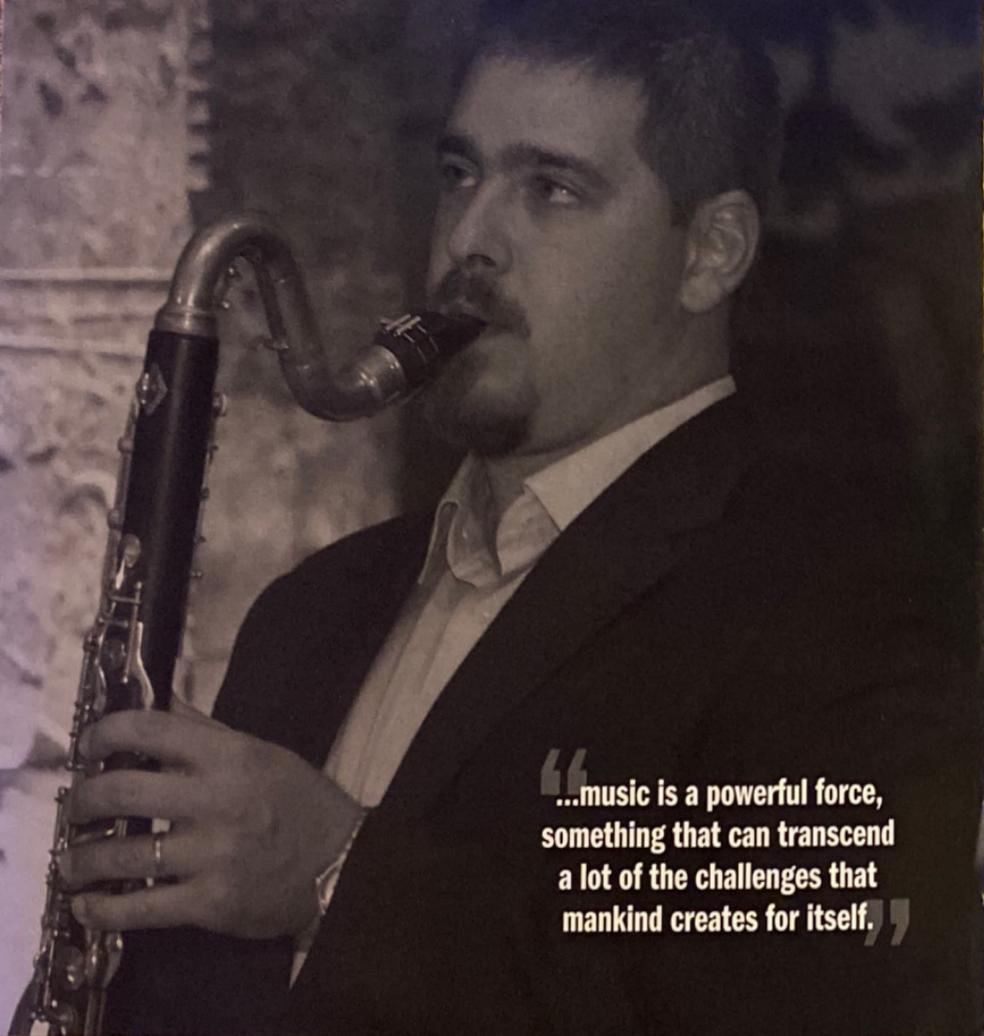
Just as central to the concept of Inheritance, of course, is the time-honored standard repertoire, and Marcus makes his command of it clear with versions of Ray Henderson and Mort Dixon’s “Bye Bye Blackbird” and Thelonious Monk’s “Epistrophy.” The former gets a fresh coat of harmonic paint and a series of intricate added measures and breaks, before easing into relaxed 7/4 for the solos. Monk’s classic “Epistrophy” theme gets elongated as well, this time to leave space for the tasty fills of Eric Kennedy. And the closing title track, a Marcus

original, draws on the harmonic and motivic language of “Mr. Day” from Coltrane Plays the Blues, as well as “Doctone” from Branford Marsalis’s 1998 disc Requiem (the last album to feature the great Kenny Kirkland). It’s an upbeat, live-sounding sendoff, summing up jazz’s capacity for endless reinvention.

It was In Pursuit of the 9th Man that made people sit up and take notice of Marcus — he was quickly tapped as a core arranger and composer for Orrin Evans’s incendiary Captain Black Big Band — and it’s Inheritance that will propel him to the next stages of his creative journey. But it isn’t only music that informs Marcus’s artistry and worldview. He’s devoted years to local activism as head of the nonprofit organization Newborn Holistic Ministries. “We’re focused on poverty-related issues here in Baltimore,” Marcus says. “We’re coming up on 12 years of a program called Martha’s Place, for women overcoming homelessness and addiction, and about four years ago we added a program called Jubilee Arts, which offers an alternative to drugs and violence with arts



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classes and other cultural activities. We've also renovated a number of vacant lots and buildings for our programs and created green spaces to beautify our community.”

Far from distracting him from his music, Marcus's community activism only enhances his ability to connect, to see the bigger picture. “I don't want to downplay the fact that music is a powerful force, something that can transcend a lot of the challenges that mankind creates for itself,” he says. “But the two halves of my

life are equally important.” That, too, is part of one's “inheritance” — the awareness that others have come before us, that others will follow after us, and that what we do in the present makes a difference. Music that's informed by these human truths is bound to sound more multi-dimensional and alive, and it's certainly borne out when Marcus takes to the studio and stage. Stay tuned.

*David R. Adler
New York, September 2012*