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**ART  
BLAKEY**  
INDESTRUCTIBLE LEGACY

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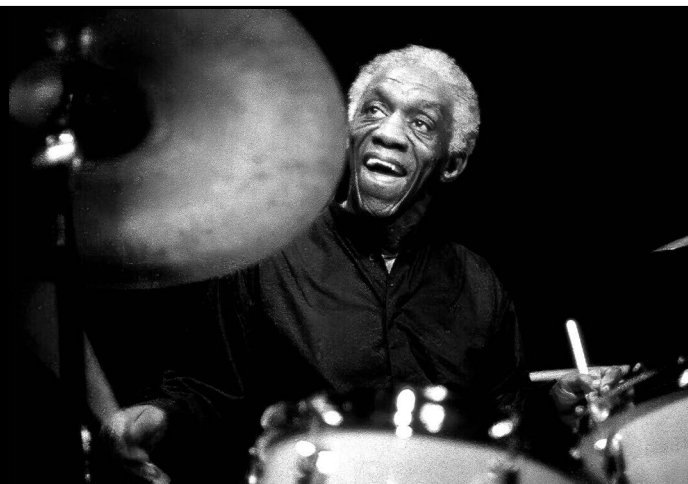
**AKIRA  
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**DR. BILLY  
TAYLOR**

# ART BLAKEY

## INDESTRUCTIBLE LEGACY

BY RUSS MUSTO



ALANNAHIGIAN

The final set of this year's Charlie Parker Jazz Festival was by Carl Allen's Art Blakey Centennial Project, playing songs from the Jazz Messengers songbook. Allen recalls, "It was an honor to present the project at the festival. For me it was very fitting because Charlie Parker changed the direction of jazz as we know it and Art Blakey changed my conceptual approach to playing music and leading a band. They were both trailblazers...Art represented in music everything that I imagined music was supposed to be: intelligence, thought-provoking, spiritual, soul-searching, gritty, humorous and a whole lot more."

Art Blakey was born on Oct. 11th, 1919 in Pittsburgh and began playing music at an early age in order to escape the toil of working in coalmines. Legend has it that he switched to drums from piano at the behest of a gun-toting club owner who felt that Erroll Garner was better suited for that position. Soon afterwards he hit the road, first with a short-lived small group led by pianist Mary Lou Williams and then with the big band of Fletcher Henderson. Roy Haynes, who heard Blakey with Henderson recalls, "He was a great drummer, definitely. He reminded me a little of Chick Webb." But touring through the Jim Crow south didn't suit Blakey and he left the band, settling in Boston for a short time where he formed his own group. A call from Billy Eckstine to replace the drafted Shadow Wilson in his orchestra sent Blakey back out on the road in 1944. The pioneering band is rightfully credited as the incubator of the nascent bebop movement that would revolutionize jazz and Blakey was the engine driving the music in its new direction. Haynes remembers hearing him with the band and noted the change in his playing. "This new music was happening—this so-called bebop—and he was dropping bombs." Blakey stayed with the Eckstine band until its demise in 1947. By that time he had relocated to New York and started his own big band, the Seventeen Messengers. It was with that group that he made his first of many dates as a leader for Blue Note. Although the group was short lived Blakey found plenty of work as the house drummer at Birdland and recording as a sideman with ex-Eckstine band members.

Following a stint with Buddy DeFranco, Blakey was back in New York, recording on dates by Clifford Brown, Lou Donaldson and Horace Silver for Blue Note. Then on Feb. 21st, 1954 the drummer teamed up the three and bassist Curley Russell for a live recording by what was to be dubbed the Blue Note All Stars but, as Donaldson relates in the film *Beyond The Notes*, a bribe paid by the drummer to Birdland emcee Pee Wee Marquette resulted in the band being called the Art Blakey Quintet. The resulting albums really launched Blakey's career as a leader. At the end of one of the sides Blakey can be heard saying, "When these guys get too old, I'll get some young ones." Thus the philosophy of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers was born.

The earliest Jazz Messengers dates done later that year were actually made under the leadership of Horace Silver. The group with trumpeter Kenny Dorham, tenor saxophonist Hank Mobley, bassist Doug Watkins and Blakey played predominantly originals by Silver, which, while maintaining the harmonic sophistication

and rhythmic vitality of bebop, took on a gospel-tinged melodicism buoyed by polyrhythmic drumming, giving the music a more accessible sound that was dubbed hardbop, a name that would be used to describe the Jazz Messengers style throughout its long existence.

By 1955, following a slew of trio recordings as a sideman with the day's most inventive players, Blakey had taken over leadership of the band with Dorham, Mobley, Silver and Watkins, recording the first Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers album *Live at the Café Bohemia*. The group disbanded due to internal conflicts, but Blakey kept the name and formed a new band with Donald Byrd, Ira Sullivan, Kenny Drew and Wilbur Ware, recording for Columbia. When that group broke up, a new one with Bill Hardman, Jackie McLean, Sam Dockery and Spanky DeBrest followed, with Johnny Griffin later added to the band and eventually replacing McLean. It was the group with Griffin that would record the classic *Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers with Thelonious Monk* album for Atlantic.

After years of changing personnel, recording for different labels, the Messengers trajectory solidified with Blakey's return to Blue Note in 1958. On Halloween eve of that year the group, now consisting of trumpeter Lee Morgan, tenor saxophonist Benny Golson, pianist Bobby Timmons and bassist Jymie Merritt, went into Rudy Van Gelder's Hackensack, New Jersey studio to record what remains its most classic album. Originally released with the eponymous title *Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers*, the date included Timmons' "Moanin'" and Golson's "Blues March" and "Along Came Betty", songs that greatly increased the band's popularity and remained in the Messengers repertoire right up to the group's final days. Golson would soon leave the band, but not before adding two more staples to the Messengers songbook: "Whisper Not" and "I Remember Clifford".

Golson's replacement in the group proved to be equally proficient and even more prolific. Saxophonist Wayne Shorter brought a whole new level of sophistication to the group, giving the band a more contemporary, but no less soulful sound that wrapped Blakey's incendiary drumming around singable melodies and opulent harmonics. As the band evolved to include Freddie Hubbard, Curtis Fuller, Cedar Walton, three similarly talented composers, along with bassist Reggie Workman, Blakey finally had a stable unit that would be hailed as his greatest group.

The ensuing years, following Shorter's exodus to join Miles Davis and the other members' departure to form their own groups, resulted in another period of shifting personnel during which time Blakey enlisted dozens of talented players. However, the Messengers star was fading in a post-Beatles era of popular music and Blakey took time off to tour with the allstar Giants of Jazz ensemble. But as a born leader Blakey could not relinquish his mantle heading the Jazz Messengers for long and soon he assembled a new group, reenlisting Hardman and recruiting tenor saxophonist David Schnitter to form a frontline to play with a revolving cast of pianists, including George Cables, Albert Dailey

and former band pianist Walter Davis, Jr. With the replacement of Hardman by Russian trumpeter Valery Ponomarev and the addition of alto saxophonist Bobby Watson to the band, Blakey once again had a stable unit, replenishing his spirit, as can be heard on the album *Gypsy Folk Tales*. The drummer was soon touring regularly again, feeling his oats, as reflected in the titles of his next records, *In My Prime* and *Album of the Year*. The latter date introduced Wynton Marsalis, along with tenor saxophonist Billy Pierce and pianist James Williams, ushering in the "Young Lions" era.

In the years to come Blakey would fuel the jazz pipeline with a bevy of talented young players, including Branford Marsalis, Donald Brown, Terence Blanchard, Donald Harrison, Philip Harper, Javon Jackson, Benny Green, Robin Eubanks, Brian Lynch, Geoff Keezer, Frank Lacy and Essiet Essiet, all of whom would go on to become leaders in their own right. After a period of woeful neglect Blakey would once again receive the critical and popular acclaim he had long deserved, elevating him to the top of the jazz world, where he would remain until his death, one week after his 71st birthday on Oct. 18th, 1990.

On the night of what would have been Blakey's 99th birthday, drummer Ralph Peterson, the only drummer to play alongside him in the Jazz Messengers Big Band, launched his Messenger Legacy band with fellow alumni Lynch, Watson, Pierce, Keezer and Essiet. He notes, "As we continue the celebration of Art Blakey's 100th Birthday touring The Messenger Legacy, I am struck by the amount of work it took for him to travel and deal with the rigors of the road. I never heard him complain about it. He loved doing it. Art Blakey was a leader of men and the roster of Messengers alumni and what they have accomplished in music and life speaks for itself and needs no defending, only celebrating. It has been a great experience. The audience response has been overwhelmingly positive. It really confirms that the Jazz Messengers sound is timeless. It's a sound that will always have a place not only in jazz history, but as a fully relevant and important part of the modern idiom of this music." ❖

For more information, visit [artblakey.com](http://artblakey.com). Blakey tributes are at Juilliard Oct. 1st, Birdland Oct. 2nd, Dizzy's Club Oct. 7th-12th and 21st, Jazz Standard Oct. 8th-9th, Smoke Oct. 10th-13th and Manhattan School of Music Oct. 17th. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Art Blakey Quintet—*A Night at Birdland, Vol. 1 & 2* (Blue Note, 1954)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Moanin'* (Blue Note, 1958)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*The Big Beat* (Blue Note, 1960)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Buhaina's Delight* (Blue Note, 1961)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Free For All* (Blue Note, 1964)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Album of the Year* (Timeless, 1981-82)