

Honoring a master

Reguero, Anna . Reguero, Anna.

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ABSTRACT

A 1959 graduate of Eastman, Carter has performed on so many historical jazz recordings that there isn't a jazz musician around that couldn't pull a "Ron Carter" album off their shelves. When Carter performs at Eastman on Saturday, he brings drummer Payton Crossley, percussionist Rolando Morales-Matos and French pianist Jacky Terrasson (who performed at the 2008 Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival).

FULL TEXT

Jazz bassist Ron Carter is definitely not acting his age. The 73-year-old is still gigging like a young road musician.

Late in September, the New York City resident flew in and out of Quebec for a single night performance. This weekend, he's playing in Boston. On Saturday, he'll be in Rochester, where he will receive an honorary doctorate degree from the Eastman School of Music.

The reasons for the honor are obvious. A 1959 graduate of Eastman, Carter has performed on so many historical jazz recordings that there isn't a jazz musician around that couldn't pull a "Ron Carter" album off their shelves. There are about 2,500 recordings to choose from, which makes Carter the most-recorded jazz bassist in history.

The catalog includes albums from Miles Davis' famed "second great quintet." E.S.P. (1965), Miles Smiles (1966) and Nefertiti (1967) are just a few. The quintet included tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter, drummer Tony Williams and a young Herbie Hancock on the piano. Other great recordings are his Blue Note albums, his collaborations with drummer Lewis Nash, more recent recordings with guitarist Russell Malone and pianist Mulgrew Miller (both who have performed in Rochester in recent years) and his unique nonet that incorporates a cello quartet.

For a full gamut of recordings, Eastman's Sibley Library created a Ron Carter Archive in 2001, when Carter helped fill in the school's collection. The school now has what's likely the most complete collection of Carter's recordings, says Jim Farrington, director of public services at the library.

Despite all the accolades he now receives, Carter's student years at Eastman were anything but easy. Carter wanted to become a professional orchestral bassist. He had played the cello for eight years, but switched to the mammoth bass during his senior year of high school. It was the 1950s, though, and some students and faculty weren't accepting of a black classical musician.

He didn't let it stop him.

"I practiced diligently," he says. He earned the principal bass chair in the Eastman Philharmonia and was chosen as a student string player to perform with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra.

"That caused some eyebrows to be raised in the school," he says. "Those kind of raised eyebrows just let me know I (was) on the right track. Those raised eyebrows had nothing to do with how well I played. It had to do with how well they (weren't) playing."

He still credits Eastman with his growth as a musician.

"One thing I learned at Eastman is to make my practice time productive," he says. He worked in the school kitchen, weekend jobs and late-night jazz gigs in order to pay for school. "It taught me money management, time management, how to make my practice time productive, how to have a goal in mind."

At the time, Eastman would host a traveling jazz show in the Eastman Theatre. When Chico Hamilton's Quintet came, Carter snuck backstage to talk with the drummer and bandleader.

Hamilton offered Carter a spot in his band. His work with Hamilton ultimately led to his historic contributions to Miles Davis' quintet in the '60s.

Carter is best known for his ability to listen and coalesce with band members, and his equivalent skills at accompaniment and melody.

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Carter says he isn't tired of his fast pace.

"I'm just trying to find a way to sound better than I did last night," he says.

AREGUERO@DemocratandChronicle.com

If you go

What: The Ron Carter Quartet.

When: 2:30 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Kilbourn Hall, 26 Gibbs St.

Cost: \$15 to \$25.

For more: (585) 454-2100 or www.esm.rochester.edu/concerts.

DETAILS

Subject: Musicians & conductors; Jazz

People: Davis, Miles Dewey

Publication title:	Rochester Democrat and Chronicle; Rochester, N.Y.
Publication year:	2010
Publication date:	Oct 10, 2010
Section:	LIVING
Publisher:	Gannett Media Corp
Place of publication:	Rochester, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	757108613
Document URL:	https://ezp.lib.rochester.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/northeastnews1/newspapers/honoring-master/docview/757108613/sem-2?accountid=13567
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Last updated:	2021-07-08
Database:	U.S. Northeast Newsstream

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