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## RON CARTER

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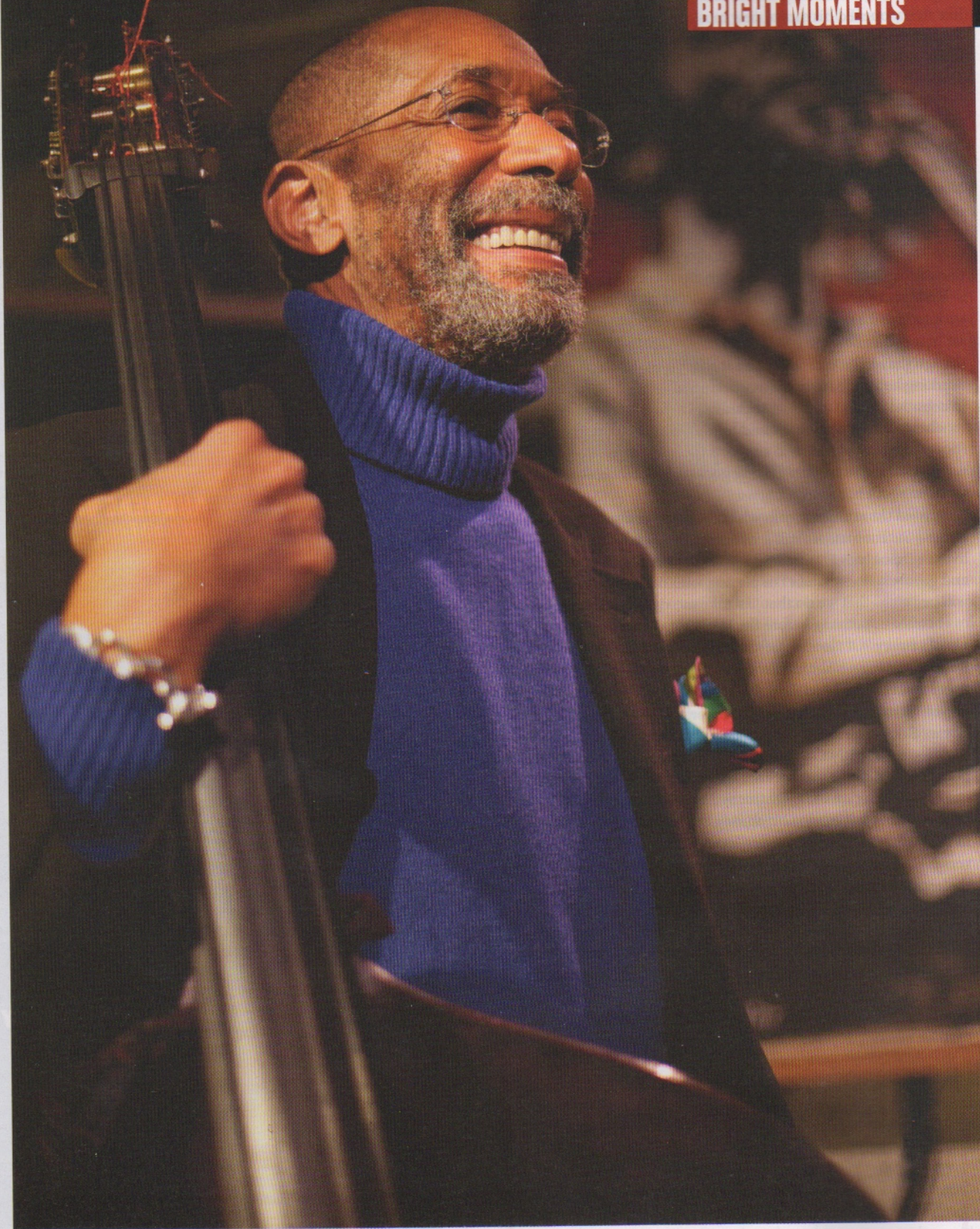
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**THE WORLD'S MOST RECORDED  
JAZZ BASSIST REVEALS THE STORIES  
BEHIND OUTSTANDING DATES  
FROM HIS MONUMENTAL CAREER**

# RON CARTER

In Ron Carter's spacious 10th-floor apartment on New York's Upper West Side, there's a plaque hanging in a prominent spot on the back wall of his bedroom. It's from Guinness World Records, and it certifies that he's the most recorded jazz bassist in history, with 2,221 individual recording credits to his name.

The certificate was issued in September of 2015, so it's already well out of date. Carter's *The Golden Striker Trio in San Sebastian*, Ethan Iverson's *The Purity of the Turf* and *Chemistry*, the fifth in an occasional series of duet dates with Houston Person, are just three of the recent albums not covered by Guinness' plaque. Which only goes to show that, at 80, Carter continues to be valued in the studio for his know-how, adaptability and authoritative upright tone.

That last characteristic—tone—is at the top of Carter's mind this sunny January morning, specifically as it pertains to one track in his vast catalog. "Listen to the first note I play on Stanley Turrentine's 'Salt Song,'" he says, referring to the Milton Nascimento-penned title cut of a 1971 album on CTI, the label for which Carter was essentially the house bassist for a number of years. "There's something coming through that I can only describe as undertones—not overtones, because they're below the note I played, and they make it do something other than what I expected it to do. I haven't been able to find that sound since then, and I don't understand why it did what it did. Maybe the bass was hot that day, or something was happening with the string. Maybe, that one time, it just happened to be my time to hear this one note." Clearly, such tantalizing moments

drive Carter to keep on discovering, and the result has been a lifetime's worth of classic jazz.

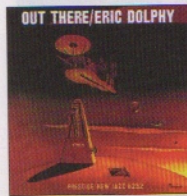
It's a little distressing to see upon arrival at Carter's home that his right arm is wrapped in a sling. But he quickly downplays the seriousness of his injury—a minor accident, nothing more, well on the mend—and predicts that he'll be back in playing shape far in advance of his next engagement, as part of a trio with pianist Michel Legrand at the Blue Note in April. Time, then, for the tall, thin gentleman with the scholarly mien to take a seat in his living room and focus on the business at hand. Out of those 2,000-plus recordings, *JazzTimes* has selected 12 particularly significant examples and asked Carter to talk about them.

Here, edited for clarity and condensed for space, is what he said.

## ERIC DOLPHY

*Out There* (Prestige/New Jazz, 1961)

Dolphy, flute, alto saxophone, bass clarinet, clarinet; Carter, cello; George Duvivier, bass; Roy Haynes, drums



When I came to New York in August of '59, I joined Chico Hamilton's band. That's how I met Eric. He knew I'd played cello through college, and I hadn't completely abandoned it yet. I was playing bass with Chico, but the cello was still what I wanted to play. Eric thought this record would be a good chance to pair me with another bass player. And what better choice than George Duvivier? I hadn't met him before, but I'd seen him play with Lena Horne. I knew he did a lot of jingle work, and the usual story among jingle players is that they want the chance to play something for longer than 35 seconds.

This was my first experience of going to a date with no rehearsal. Eric trusted my judgment, so I copied out some

**BY MAC RANDALL**

music for him by hand. I was just learning how to do arrangements and I knew Randy Weston had a nice library of songs to pick from, but we didn't end up doing many of them. [Only one Weston composition, "Sketch of Melba," appears on the album.] We made the record at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in one day. It was a small budget, of course, but I didn't know then what budgets meant. We were supposed to start at 10 o'clock, and I got to Rudy's at 9 o'clock. That impressed Rudy.

I learned later on that making a gig is one thing and making a record is a whole other physical event. I was fortunate that the other people in the room that day were more experienced in the studio than I, and that they were all able and willing to be part of a concept that was kind of new at the time.

**WES MONTGOMERY**

***SO Much Guitar!* (Riverside, 1961)**

Montgomery, electric guitar; Hank Jones, piano; Carter, bass; Lex Humphries, drums; Ray Barretto, congas



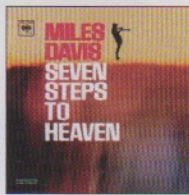
I was surprised to get a call from [producer] Orrin Keepnews, because I didn't really know him. Wes Montgomery was stepping it up. He'd already made records with some big-name players, and I was a lower man on the big-name totem pole. That Orrin would take a chance on hiring this relatively new guy on the scene was quite a stunner. But I guess he thought I could handle this project with this comet who was just getting brighter and brighter. Wes had his own sound that wasn't like the other guitar players at that time; he didn't articulate like Herb Ellis or Barney Kessel. His style of using the thumb with no pick was less pointed. My job was to find basslines that worked and would still be out of his range of sound.

That was the first time I met Ray Barretto, but I knew the records he'd done on Prestige with Gene Ammons, and I was like, "Boy, I'm going right into the fire now—I'd better put on white gloves and white shoes, 'cause they're gonna walk all over me!" I didn't play the real Latin basslines that Ray was used to. But he liked that. He didn't say, "Oh, man, don't play *that*." He was always aware of whatever was going on beneath him, and he could find a way to make it part of his music.

**MILES DAVIS**

***Seven Steps to Heaven* (Columbia, 1963)**

Davis, trumpet; George Coleman, tenor saxophone; Victor Feldman, Herbie Hancock, piano; Carter, bass; Frank Butler, Tony Williams, drums



I hadn't recorded with Miles before, so I had nothing to compare this to. The tunes were all done in one or two takes. The first session, with Victor and Frank, was in a big room [Columbia Studios in Los Angeles], a whole new physical environment for me, and to see that the band we'd worked with

for the past six weeks wasn't the band in the studio—well, I just raised my eyebrows at that and said, "He's the boss, and whoever's there, that's what the deal is."

This was one of the first times I really became aware of how my bass notes could affect everyone else. There's a tag on the end of "Baby Won't You Please Come Home"—Miles was really



› Carter and Miles Davis in 1967

**"WHILE NOT BEING A LEADERLESS BAND—MILES WAS CLEARLY THE LEADER—[THE QUINTET] WAS DEMOCRATIC. EVERYONE HAD AN OPINION, NO ONE WAS AFRAID TO EXPRESS IT, AND WHATEVER THE CONSEQUENCES OF IT WERE, WE'D ACCEPT THEM."**

into doing tags for, like, 25 minutes, and the fun of the gig was to try and figure out what was going to come next. In the course of this tag I'm trying to play a diminished chord, and for the first three times Victor doesn't play the chord I'm trying to play. He plays it on the fourth time, and the music just lights up. That band is now aware that this bass note has changed the whole

FOR CATO/COURTESY OF SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT

FRANCIS WOFF/MOSAC IMAGES

Carter and Miles Davis in 1967

fabric of the piece. Recordings, if you pay attention, can give you that kind of insight. To hear this one note that you played on tape for six seconds, it beats practicing for 25 hours. You get to understand the effect of that one note, how it started being there two notes before and then resolved to a fourth note. I didn't understand that before. I didn't know the harmony involved; I just didn't know that detail, other than feeling, "This is the right thing to do, and it must be OK 'cause I did it last week [laughs]."

**MILES DAVIS**  
*E.S.P.* (Columbia, 1965)

*Davis, trumpet; Wayne Shorter, tenor saxophone; Herbie Hancock, piano; Carter, bass; Tony Williams, drums*



Miles asked us to bring in tunes of our own for whatever the next record was going to be. That was a clear indication that we'd come to a fork in the road. So we all wrote out music by hand, and there were some missed lines and penmanship that was kind of lame. Wayne had the best penmanship,

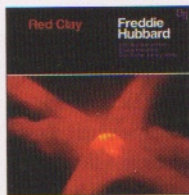
'cause he'd been writing more than anybody else. My manuscripts were ... not indecipherable, but I had to say, "No, man, it's *this* note" and stuff. We understood that though we were all fledgling composers, Wayne was at the head of the group.

Listening to [Miles'] *Freedom Jazz Dance* [The Bootleg Series Vol. 5, a collection of the quintet's studio outtakes released in 2016] flashed me back to how that band thought. While not being a leaderless band—Miles was clearly the leader—it was democratic. Everyone had an opinion, no one was afraid to express it, and whatever the consequences of it were, we'd accept them. If the consequences were that we didn't do something, then we didn't do it, and there was no problem.

My main interest here was to have all my notes heard, because I knew that they were one of the things that made the engine work. Whether my notes represented the coal being shoveled in the fire or the fire itself or the speed the train picked up based on how much fire we gave it, they were important. And because Tony was so aware of his drum pitches—the bass drum was always a certain pitch and clearly differently pitched from the floor tom, with a nice bright snare drum and wonderful cymbals—whatever he played, there was still a chance for my notes to be heard. I took advantage of that as best I could.

**FREDDIE HUBBARD**  
*Red Clay* (CTI, 1970)

*Hubbard, trumpet; Joe Henderson, tenor saxophone, flute; Herbie Hancock, electric piano, organ; Carter, acoustic and electric bass; Lenny White, drums*



The backstory to this is that Lenny White wanted to play the same drums that he played live. He was determined to have this oil-can bass drum be part of the record. Rudy [Van Gelder] didn't want to hear that; he wanted to use *his* bass drum. We did take after take and the drum sound wasn't OK. Lenny kept insisting on playing that drum and Rudy kept insisting that it wasn't working. We were all getting pretty frustrated. Somebody had to say this, so I said it: "Lenny, we've had enough. Let's figure this stuff out." We went outside and I

said, "Lenny, if you want to be on this record, if this music is that important to you, you've got to put that bass drum outside where we're talking and use Rudy's bass drum. Otherwise we won't get anything done. He's getting tired, he's getting angry and you're not helping him by being stubborn." He shook his head—"Aw, OK, man"—walked in there, changed the bass drum and the rest is the record. Fabulous record, by the way.

**BILLY COBHAM**  
*Spectrum* (Atlantic, 1973)

*Cobham, drums, percussion; Jimmy Owens, flugelhorn, trumpet; Joe Farrell, soprano and alto saxophone, flute; Tommy Bolin, guitar; Jan Hammer, keyboards; Carter, acoustic bass; Lee Sklar, electric bass; Ray Barretto, congas*

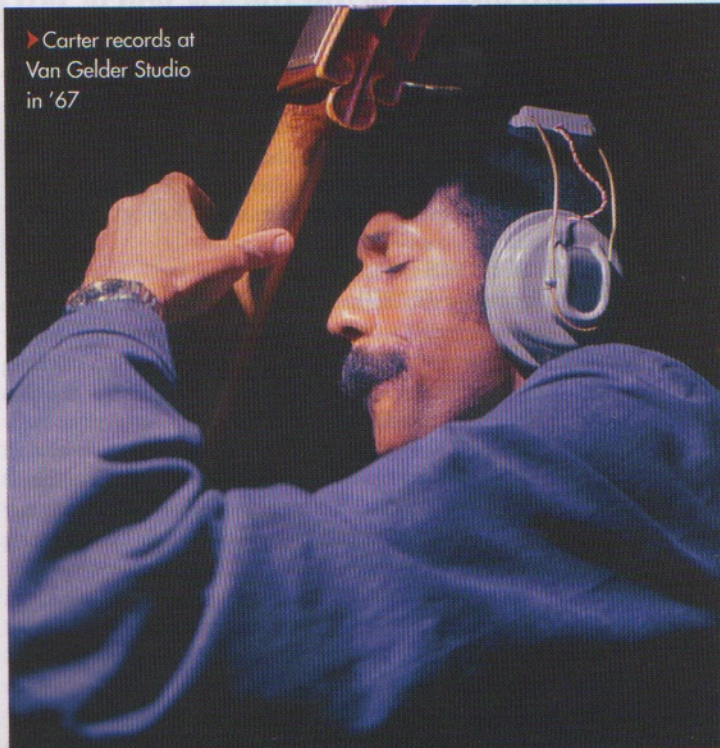


One of the things I like about Billy's playing is that he uses different sizes and numbers of drums for different groups. He seems to understand that while he's BILLY COBHAM, all in capital letters, he's also going to do whatever makes the music work. And I've always admired him for

making those kinds of choices. He has a chance to play all this great music; why would he play 12 drums when he only needs four? The only trick is, because he's playing left-handed, I have to work out which side of him to stand on so I can hear more clearly what he's playing.

I was still learning how to play Latin basslines on these tracks. I'm still trying to figure that shit out *now*. It's amazing to me that these guys do all that stuff with two or three chords night in and night out. And I was with the king of the congas again—nice place to be. Although I didn't see Ray often, it was always a pleasure just to meet him. I had the chance to sit next

▶ Carter records at Van Gelder Studio in '67



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FRANCIS WOUF/MOSAC IMAGES

▶ Carter, Paul Motian and Bill Frisell (from left) in 2005



**“WHEN I MET BILL [FRISELL] FOR THE FIRST GIG WITH THAT TRIO, I TOLD HIM, ‘LOOK, ON THIS GIG YOU’RE NOT PLAYING ANY CLOUDS, OK?’ BILL JUST LAUGHED.”**

to him when he was anointed an NEA Jazz Master [in January 2006, a month before Barretto’s death], and though he was a shy guy, he seemed really comfortable being with me. I stayed with him for the whole ceremony, and afterwards he just stood next to me. It was a nice feeling, to have this giant be my friend.

**HUBERT LAWS**

*In the Beginning* (CTI, 1974)

Large-ensemble session with Laws, flute; Ronnie Laws, tenor saxophone; Gene Bertocini, guitar; Bob James, keyboards, conductor; Clare Fischer, acoustic and electric piano; Richard Tee, organ; Carter, bass; Steve Gadd, drums; Airtio Moreira, percussion



I’ve always been amazed by Hubert’s ability to play those intervals on the flute, at the right times with great sound. This one has “Moment’s Notice” on it, right? One of his big showpieces. He *burned* on that tune.

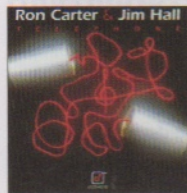
At this time, Rudy [Van Gelder] and I were experimenting with pickups. They were just starting to develop new pickups and preamps and amplifiers for the bass; we were at the early stages of this ... bass presence announcement, I like to call it. I’d go out to Rudy’s every Saturday with my kids. They would sit in the corner and

read, and Rudy and I would try pickups, pickup placements, pickups with microphone A, pickups with microphone B—in this corner, in that corner, in the control room. We’d just be all over the place, man, for four to five hours, Saturdays on end. I don’t remember what we used specifically on this record—probably a combination of mic and pickup, but I can’t say for sure because we tried out so much stuff. Rudy wanted to figure out how to record the bass, and I wanted to figure out how to make it sound like me [laughs]. So we had the same goal in mind, but we had different interests in how to get there.

**RON CARTER & JIM HALL**

*Telephone* (Concord Jazz, 1985)

Carter, bass; Hall, electric guitar



My first function in the duo with Jim was to make his arrangements work. My second function was to get to where he was going harmonically before he got there [laughs]. And then he would say, “Hey, man, don’t do that.” “Don’t do what, Jim?” “Don’t lead me so far.” I’d say, “Well, Jim, I’m hearing the whole page!” This jovial banter would go on and off, as an acknowledgment of two things: one, that Jim

RALPH GIBSON/COURTESY OF NONESUCH RECORDS

heard what I was trying to do, and two, that I heard what he was *hoping* to do.

I knew Jim for almost 40 years and we made some fantastic music, man. Sometimes it felt just like “Kilroy was here”—you know the cartoon of the guy hanging on by his fingernails? We hung on, we didn’t give up and we got back home, because that was our job. It was kind of the gold standard of bass/guitar duos. I look around and he’s not here, and it just makes me stop in my tracks and say, “Wow, the Creator allowed this experience for me.”

### HOUSTON PERSON & RON CARTER

*Something in Common* (Muse, 1990)

Person, tenor saxophone; Carter, bass



Houston’s style is one I wish more tenor players would examine, not just because of the sound he has but how he plays a song’s melody and knows the verse. It’s critical to be able to understand what the song was meant to do by the writer. If your view of it is different, so be it, but at

least you know what the intent was. Houston always knows that. I treasure every moment with him, because he plays right. And he trusts my note choices.

You may get the impression that what we do on these duo records is casual, like we just walked in the door. But when it’s only saxophone and bass, with no other chordal or rhythmic input, we have to prepare for that. We pick a library, pick a key and an approximate tempo for each song, so we’re not goin’ in there jammin’. We have a plan. And one of the reasons it’s fun is that we can see how our pre-prep makes this thing easier for us to do. We’re not worried about the arrangement or the key anymore; we’re only worried about the notes and how we’re swinging. Our focus is on whether we can play together.

### HORACE SILVER

*The Hardbop Grandpop* (Impulse!/GRP, 1996)

Silver, piano; Claudio Roditi, trumpet, flugelhorn; Steve Turre, trombone; Michael Brecker, tenor saxophone; Ronnie Cuber, baritone saxophone; Carter, bass; Lewis Nash, drums



I met Horace in 1957. He was playing at a club outside Rochester, and I was there with my friends. He did a tune called “No Smokin’,” and I asked him, “Mr. Silver, could you give me the changes to that tune? I want to find out how it works.” He said, “Wait till the record comes out.” I

said, “Really? OK.” Fast-forward nearly 40 years: We’re on this date for what ultimately became *The Hardbop Grandpop*, and after the first take I said, “Horace, am I ready now for those ‘No Smokin’ changes?” He remembered that story, clapped me on the back and said, “I think you can do that now [laughs].”

What I learned from Horace is preparation for the date. We’d have rehearsals. He’d bring the music in, and then, after we’d gotten the tune understood, we’d run through it and he’d time each chorus, mark the tempo and mark the tune’s length. The following day at rehearsal, he’d have all these adjustments made. He knew that the tune was going to be five and a half minutes long—two choruses trumpet, three choruses tenor,

two choruses piano, ensemble melody and out, or whatever arrangement he’d come up with. So when we got to the studio, it was just a matter of following the floor plan. It was great to watch that happen. The fog of “Who’s playing next?” and “How long should I play?” and “What’s this chord here?” was gone. He made sure that we could see the landscape, and that’s why his records all sound wonderful.

### BILL FRISELL/RON CARTER/ PAUL MOTIAN

*Bill Frisell, Ron Carter, Paul Motian* (Nonesuch, 2006)

Frisell, electric guitar; Carter, bass; Motian, drums



When I met Bill for the first gig with that trio, I told him, “Look, on this gig you’re not playing any clouds, OK?” Bill just laughed. I mean, Paul Motian could play wonderful, but he wasn’t known as a “time” kind of drummer, and Bill’s variety of genres was so wide, you know? Well,

we got to the gig, man, and I’d play four quarter notes and Paul would fall right in! And then when the time for the clouds came, we’d do the cloud thing. I cherish those moments, because here’s a case of three guys who are clearly somewhere else in their musical inspirations and are not only able to be flexible with someone else who’s got a different zone in their head but willing to make their own adjustment match the group concept.

I’m sorry more people didn’t hear that group live. It was a perfect example of how concepts are all relative. We all thought that the big thing is Music with a capital M.

### RON CARTER & THE WDR BIG BAND

*My Personal Songbook* (In + Out, 2015)

Big-band session featuring Richard DeRosa, arranger and conductor; Carter, bass



What really got my attention was that they wanted me to be the featured artist. I never thought I’d be the featured bass player in a big band, or any group. I kind of hate that “featuring” designation; I’m just a guy trying to make the band sound good—that’s my feature. But they took it one step further and said, “How about making a record of all your songs?” And I said, “How about *that*, ladies and gentlemen? OK, I think I can handle that responsibility.” My only wish is that I’d been able to take my bass on the gig when we recorded it in Germany. While the bass I used sounds OK, it’s not the sound that I want to be held responsible for. But that’s the chance you take when you don’t go on the road with your own bass. You can’t do that now, for reasons that are pretty clear.

That was a fantastic band, and the music was sent to them in advance, so they’d been able to practice it several times before I got to the studio. I was basically sight-reading this stuff, but I said to them, “Two takes. I don’t want to hear take 35, not on my record.” They were like [adopts exasperated tone], “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I said, “Look, it’s like this [points to his head]: in charge [laughs].” **JT**