

'Don't let it become a job'

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Piano master Barron is still a force on any stage

By Siddhartha Mitter, Globe Correspondent | April 2, 2010

It's been a season of recognition for Kenny Barron. In January the pianist received the National Endowment for the Arts' Jazz Masters award, the most prestigious honor in the field, at the ceremony the NEA holds each year at Jazz at Lincoln Center. At 66, Barron was the youngest of this year's crop, which included one of his mentors, Yusef Lateef. And this spring Barron will receive an honorary degree from the Berklee College of Music.

A steady and highly regarded presence on the jazz scene since 1961, when he arrived in New York as a teenager from Philadelphia and joined Dizzy Gillespie's band, Barron has entered the lifetime-achievement phase of his career, somewhat to his bemusement.

"My first thought when they told me about it was, wow, am I really that old?" he says of hearing the news of his NEA award, which carries a \$25,000 purse, lavish by the depleted financial standards of jazz. He is nursing an afternoon cognac in a New York restaurant, having just taught his ensemble class at Juilliard.

Barron has never ceased to be active. With a vast discography, most recently 2008's "The Traveler," which featured guest vocalists for the first time, he is gearing for a new project with saxophonist David Sanchez, a friend and former student. Barron brings his working trio — with bassist Kiyoshi Kitagawa and drummer Johnathan Blake — to the Regattabar this weekend.

Yet broad-banner fame has sometimes eluded this soft-spoken man, despite high encomiums from his peers. Stan Getz, with whom he recorded beautiful duets before Getz's death in 1991, called Barron one of "only three pianists left" — along with Hank Jones and Tommy Flanagan.

Today that picture has changed, with young pianists — Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer, Brad Mehldau, Ethan Iverson, Robert Glasper — at the forefront of creativity in the music. Barron says he pays attention to what these artists are doing, despite the generational remove from some of their influences, like hip-hop.

"I listen, and I try and steal," he says with a chuckle. "Some of the things they do rhythmically, or even technically, in terms of using electronics and things like that."

His own sensibility remains at the productive center of jazz, in a place where melodies prevail but never turn mawkish; where experiments occur but never grow aggressive or jarring.

Barron is considered a lyrical pianist, as opposed to a percussive player in the tradition of Thelonious

Monk or Randy Weston, yet in the 1980s he led a group, Sphere, devoted to Monk, which was one of the high points in a decade where mainstream jazz often struggled. Later, Barron grew fond of Brazilian music, which he says he prizes for its harmonic subtleties.

Lyricalism has always been a priority, Barron says. “It is something I strive for. Most of the people I admired were very lyrical in their playing. It’s not about scales and chord patterns and how fast you can do this or that; it’s about telling a story.”

He remembers Nat King Cole’s “Sweet Lorraine” and Billy Eckstine’s “The Very Thought of You” as songs he loved as a child. Once he got to New York, though, he was plunged into a milieu where jazz was bubbling in myriad directions — and its players were living in close proximity.

“I stayed with bass player Vishnu Wood,” he says of his first quarters in the East Village. “Across the street Lee Morgan, Reggie Workman, and Tootie Heath lived together. Pepper Adams lived upstairs, and Elvin Jones.” The clubs and coffee shops were nearby. “So it was an interesting neighborhood.”

After five years with Gillespie, Barron went on to work with Freddie Hubbard and later Lateef. It was education by apprenticeship — he got a college degree later in life — and the standard way jazz musicians developed at the time.

Today the music schools like Berklee rule the roost. Barron himself taught many years at Rutgers University. “And there are a lot of musicians today who are much further ahead than I was at the same age, in terms of technique,” he says. “But mostly they don’t tell any stories yet. At that will change, once they’ve lived a little bit.”

Tom Riley, Berklee’s vice president for external affairs, calls Barron “a triple threat of jazz: a graceful and sophisticated pianist, a deft composer, and an educator who shares the tradition.” And when he receives his Berklee honor, Barron will get to address a graduating class that includes his granddaughter, Nikara Warren, a vibraphonist.

What will he tell them? “Go out, listen to music, take risks,” Barron says. “I think that’s the important part. Don’t let it become a job, whatever you do.

“You have to give yourself permission to fail. That’s part of the journey, you reach for things and sometimes you don’t make it. But that’s OK. The way I look at it, there’s always another chorus coming.” ■