

Stanley Clarke

Profile

Bassist Stanley Clarke was barely out of his teens when he exploded into the jazz world in 1971. Fresh out of the Philadelphia Academy of Music, he arrived in New York City and immediately landed jobs with famous bandleaders such as Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Dexter Gordon, Joe Henderson, Pharaoh Saunders, Gil Evans, Stan Getz and a budding young pianist-composer named Chick Corea.

All of these musicians immediately recognized Clarke's ferocious dexterity and complete musicality on the acoustic bass. Not only was he an expert at crafting bass lines and functioning as a timekeeper – in keeping with his instrument's traditional role – but the young prodigy also possessed a sense of lyricism and melody distilled from his bass heroes Charles Mingus, Scott LaFaro and others, as well as non-bass players like John Coltrane. Clarke envisioned the bass as a viable, melodic solo instrument positioned at the front of the stage rather than in a background role, and he was uniquely qualified to take it there.

The vision became a reality when Clarke and Corea formed the seminal electric jazz/fusion band Return To Forever. RTF was a showcase for each of the quartet's strong musical personalities, composing prowess and instrumental voices. "We really didn't realize how much of an impact we were having on people at the time," Clarke recalls. "We were touring so much then, we would just make a record and then go back on the road." The band recorded eight albums, two of which were certified gold (*Return To Forever* and the classic *Romantic Warrior*). They also won a GRAMMY (*No Mystery*) and received numerous nominations while touring incessantly.

Then Clarke fired the "shot heard round the world," the one that started the '70s bass revolution and paved the way for all bassists/soloists/bandleaders to follow. In 1974, he released his eponymous *Stanley Clarke* album, which featured the hit single, "Lopsy Lu." Two years later, he released *School Days*, an album whose title track is now a bona fide bass anthem.

"School Days" has since become a must-learn for nearly every up-and-coming bassist, regardless of genre. Aspiring bassists must also master the percussive slap funk technique that Clarke pioneered as well. While Sly and the Family Stone's Larry Graham had already developed a rudimentary slap technique, Clarke took the idea and ran with it, adapting the technique to complex jazz harmonies. "Larry started it, but he had only one lick," says Clarke. "I took it from there. A lot of guys could jam all day in E, but couldn't play it over changes."

Clarke became the first bassist in history to headline tours, sell out shows worldwide, and craft albums that achieved gold status. At 25, he was already regarded as a pioneer in the jazz fusion movement. He was also the first bassist in history to double on acoustic and electric bass with equal virtuosity, power and fire. In his ongoing efforts to push the bass to new limits, he invented two new instruments, the piccolo bass and the tenor bass. The piccolo bass is tuned one octave higher than the traditional electric bass. The tenor bass is tuned one fourth higher than standard. Both of these instruments have enabled Clarke to extend his melodic range to higher and more expressive registers.

Clarke teamed up with keyboardist George Duke in 1981 to form the Clarke/Duke Project. Together they scored a top 20 pop hit with "Sweet Baby," recorded three albums and continue to tour together to this day. Clarke's involvement in additional projects as leader or active member include: Jeff Beck (world tours, 1979), Keith Richards' New Barbarians (world tour, 1980), Animal Logic (with Stuart Copeland, two albums and tours, 1989), the "Superband" (with Larry Carlton, Billy Cobham, Najee and Deron Johnson, 1993-1994), The Rite of Strings (with Jean-Luc Ponty and Al Di Meola, 1995) and Vertu' (with Lenny White, 1999). Clarke's creativity has been recognized and rewarded in every

way imaginable: gold and platinum records, GRAMMY Awards, Emmy Awards, virtually every readers and critics poll in existence, and more. He was *Rolling Stone*'s very first Jazzman of the Year, and bassist winner of *Playboy*'s Music Award for ten straight years.

Always in search of new challenges, Clarke turned his boundless creative energy to film and television scoring in the mid-1980s. Starting on the small screen with an Emmy-nominated score for *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, he transitioned to the silver screen as composer, orchestrator, conductor and performer of scores for such blockbuster films as *Boyz 'N the Hood*, *What's Love Got To Do With It?*, *Little Big League*, *Passenger 57*, *Poetic Justice*, *The Five Heartbeats*, *Romeo Must Die*, *The Transporter* and *Roll and Bounce*. He even scored *Remember the Time*, a Michael Jackson video directed by Jon Singleton. His scoring can currently be heard on the series *Lincoln Heights* for the ABC Family Network.

"Film has given me the opportunity to compose large orchestral scores and to compose music not normally associated with myself," says Clarke. "It's given me the chance to conduct orchestras and arrange music for various types of ensembles. It's been a diverse experience for me musically, made me a more complete musician, and focused my skills completely." His 1995 release, *Stanley Clarke at the Movies*, is a testament to this heightened level of musicianship.

Aside from his various pursuits as a composer, performer and recording artist, Clarke also heads Roxboro Entertainment Group, a business venture that includes music publishing for his own and other musicians' work, as well as the development of various projects aimed at music education.

At the turn of the new millennium, after several years of film scoring, Clarke returned more formally to his first love: performing, recording and playing the bass. He joined the Heads Up International label with the March 2007 release of *Night School: An Evening with Stanley Clarke and Friends*, a 90-minute DVD that chronicles the third annual Stanley Clarke Scholarship Concert, recorded at Musicians Institute in Hollywood, CA, in October 2002. With guest performances by Stevie Wonder, Wallace Roney, Bela Fleck, Sheila E., Stewart Copeland, Flea, Wayman Tisdale, Marcus Miller and more, *Night School* captures performances that range from straightahead jazz to full-tilt rock fusion to twenty-two-piece string arrangements.

Clarke follows *Night School* with the October 2007 release of *The Toys of Men*, a 13-track CD that examines the emotional sweep of war, and features guest appearances by vocalist/bassist Esperanza Spalding, percussionist Paulinho da Costa. *The Toys of Men* also includes acoustic bass interludes that provide a stirring counterpoint to Clarke's more well known fiery electric bass attack.

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