

MACEO PARKER

Biography

While most sax players have followed in the footsteps of jazz legends like Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, Maceo Parker has consistently marched to a different tune. Since his earliest days, he has gravitated to the more rhythmic and soulful end of the spectrum, following figures like Louis Jordan, Ray Charles and James Brown – all of whom were innovators, each pushing their respective sound and style to the point of becoming something entirely new. It was Parker's recurring stints in Brown's band, in fact, that not only produced some of the most enduring entries in the vast canon of American soul music, but also sowed the seeds of the funk revolution of the 1970s. In hindsight, Maceo Parker has been as innovative as the people whom he cites as his own influences.

Born in Kinston, North Carolina in 1943, Parker picked up the saxophone during his pre-teen years and played in a band with his brothers. One of his earliest influences was Ray Charles, who by the late 1950s had already become a monumental figure in the burgeoning blues-and-jazz hybrid that had come to be known as rhythm and blues. Parker still remembers coming home from school with his brothers one day and hearing "What'd I Say" on the radio for the first time: "Man, we almost tore that place all to pieces because we couldn't believe it. I'll never forget that day. It was like Christmas morning and New Years morning combined."

He adds: "I got into Ray at a very early age. I'd listen to him sing and I'd try to equate that with playing the saxophone...He was always the cat for me."

Parker joined James Brown's band in 1964 – originally as a baritone player. He came as part of a package deal when Brown hired his brother, drummer Melvin Parker, but the sax player quickly established himself as a valuable member of the team. The first sides he cut with Brown, "I Feel Good" and "Out of Sight," became some of the most famous of Brown's canon. When St. Clair Pinkney, Brown's regular tenor player, took ill for a couple weeks, Parker took over. After Pinkney returned, the two sax men alternated between tenor and bari, until Parker became the full-time tenor player. Parker's first tenor outing on vinyl was Brown's classic "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag."

Onstage, Parker served as the perfect foil to the Godfather of Soul – punctuating the frontman's incendiary vocals and mesmerizing stage choreography with horn blasts that were equal parts melody and percussion. At the height of their collaborative powers, it was difficult to tell where the genius of one ended and the other began.

Parker left Brown's band in 1970 to launch his own outfit, Maceo & All the King's Men, but reconnected with Brown three years later – switching to alto sax and laying down horn tracks for Brown's "Cold Sweat," "Lickin' Stick" and "Mother Popcorn."

He released his first solo record, *Us People*, in 1974, followed a year later by *Funky Music Machine*. Throughout the late '70s and early '80s, he was a featured player with

George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic and Bootsy Collins' Rubber Band. After a brief hiatus, he returned to James Brown until the latter's incarceration at the end of the 1980s. At this point Maceo's solo career began developing into what we are familiar with today. A steady stream of records followed, beginning in 1990 with his first album in this solo period, *Roots Revisted*, which set the benchmark by remaining number one on the jazz charts for over 10 weeks. It was the seminal *Life on Planet Groove* in 1992 that brought Maceo to the attention of younger, college-aged audiences and gave him a strong following throughout the world.

Some of Parker's more recent solo projects include *Funk Overload, 1998, Made By Maceo* (2003) and *School's In* (2005). He joins the Heads Up International label with the February 2008 release of *Roots & Grooves*, a two-disc set that positions him front and center with Germany's WDR Big Band, arguably the hottest jazz orchestra on the European continent. The first half of *Roots & Grooves* is a big band tribute to Parker's first and most important influence, Ray Charles. The second set recasts some of Parker's own classic material – "Off the Hook," "Uptown Up," "Shake Everything You Got" and others – in richly layered big band arrangements.

Without question, Parker's body of work over the past four decades stands on its own merits, yet he sees the music as part of an even greater message. "At all my concerts, I try to say 'love' as many times as I can," he says. "I think if we all use that word as much as we possibly can, the idea will flourish, and all that other negative stuff will diminish. So I'm definitely going to do what I think is my part by just showing the spirit of love throughout the word as much as I can."

For more information, please visit Maceo's website at www.maceo.com