

TERRI LYNE CARRINGTON : A POWERHOUSE DRUMMER WHO TAKES NO PRISONERS

by Eric Myers



The American Terri Lyne Carrington is in many ways the star of the forthcoming Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival. A powerhouse drummer who takes no prisoners, she will perform with one of Australia's leading female musicians, saxophonist Sandy Evans, on November 10 and 11 at Sydney's Foundry 616.

The three male musicians involved, Aron Ottignon (piano), Ben Hauptmann (guitar) and Jonathan Zwartz (bass) will outnumber the two females. But there is no doubt that a feminist spirit will be in the air. Carrington is perhaps the most overtly political US jazz musician this country has welcomed for some time.

"Many elements of jazz have remained in the past, therefore artists that are trying to move jazz forward can't be in the past regarding social issues," she says. "I have experienced a charmed and fruitful career, feeling relatively unscathed in comparison to many other female musicians. But the current climate of activism suggests we don't hide behind our instruments or be reclusive artists, but instead accept a call to arms. In my 30 plus year career, I should have had more female peers than I've had."

Given Carrington's lineage it's not surprising that, from an early age, she was headed for distinction in jazz. Her mother played piano, and her father saxophone. She began on the saxophone herself at five. When her baby teeth fell out and her embouchure collapsed, she switched to the drums at seven, inheriting a set owned by her grandfather Matt Carrington Jr, a distinguished drummer who had played with pianist Fats Waller and saxophonist Chu Berry.



Terri Lyne Carrington at the age of five on saxophone, pictured with her father Solomon Matthew Carrington the third ...

A child prodigy on the drums, often described as a “kid wonder”, she benefited from her father, Solomon Matthew Carrington the third, being President of the Boston Jazz Society. He came into regular contact with the greatest American jazz musicians passing through the city, and took every opportunity to enable the fledgling young drummer to play with them.



A memorable night: Carrington at the age of 11, sitting in with Oscar Peterson ...

A memorable event at the age of 11 was a portent of what was to come. Carrington sat in with the Canadian pianist Oscar Peterson at the 1976 Boston Globe Jazz Fest. Peterson heard that the young Terri had played the previous night with the trumpeter Clark Terry – one of her many mentors - so he insisted that she play with him too. The President of Boston's famous Berklee College of Music happened to be in the audience; he offered her a full scholarship to Berklee on the spot.

This began a fruitful relationship with one of the world's most respected jazz colleges. Many years later, in 2003, Berklee awarded her an honorary doctorate. Now, she occupies a professorial position at the Berklee Global Jazz Institute, as Zildjian Chair in Performance.

Carrington hit New York in 1983 as an 18-year-old, moving effortlessly into the top echelons of American jazz, working as a sideperson with stellar musicians: Pharaoh Sanders, Lester Bowie, James Moody, Wayne Shorter, Stan Getz, Clark Terry.



Carrington (far left): aged 22, touring with the Wayne Shorter group...

Carrington came to prominence when many of the great American jazz musicians were beginning to fade away. She stresses the benefits to her growth and development afforded by her many mentors.

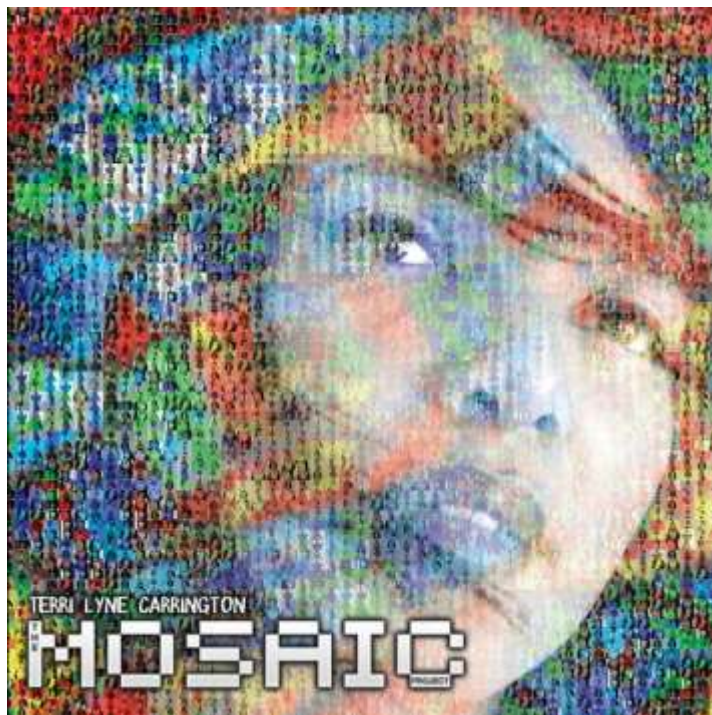
"I've been performing with great jazz musicians since I was a kid. And I always revered them. It's been great to be part of a line of such amazing players. Teaching allows me to pass it on. Most of the masters of the music are gone now. So it's really important for me to be able to say, 'Dizzy Gillespie taught me this.'"

"One of the things I've learnt from all these greats is that you have to have your own voice, and your own sound. None of these people spent much time jumping on a bandwagon, or copying. In the beginning you copy what you hear, but as you develop you have to have a vision, and your own take on things."

“The mentors I’ve had communicated to me the essence of what this music is all about. Jazz is a lifestyle. It’s a language.”

She released a number of albums under her leadership – the first in 1989, when she was 24, titled *Real Life Story*. Nominated for a Grammy, it foreshadowed her later approach, inviting a stellar lineup of leading musicians to collaborate with her: Carlos Santana, Grover Washington Jr, Dianne Reeves, Wayne Shorter.

Meanwhile, after a move to LA in the early 90s, she was paying her dues as house drummer for two late-night TV shows: The Arsenio Hall Show and Quincy Jones’s late-night TV show *VIBE*.



The real game changer was her fifth album *The Mosaic Project* in 2011, when she was well into her 40s and now confident enough to make a powerful individual statement. Feminists applauded an unusual innovation: an all-female album, both performers and band. The dynamic female jazz vocalists on the album included Esperanza Spalding, Dianne Reeves, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Cassandra Wilson, Sheila E, Geri Allen, and others. Critically acclaimed, it won the Grammy for Best Jazz Vocal Album.

Two years later the icing on the cake arrived: a Grammy for her album *Money Jungle: Provocative in Blue*. This was Carrington’s tribute to the classic 1962 album from Duke Ellington (piano), Charles Mingus (bass) and Max Roach (drums). Utilising the core trio of herself on drums, plus Christian McBride (bass) and Gerald Clayton (piano) plus various horn players, Carrington did not imitate the classic music on that album, but captured its essence by re-imagining the music through her own contemporary vision.

For the first time in 56 years the Grammy Award for Best Jazz Instrumental Album went to a woman.



*L-R, Duke Ellington, Max Roach and Charles Mingus, pictured during the recording of *The Money Jungle*, in 1962...*

Carrington is frank in her debt to Ellington. Not only was his career instrumental in making it easier for black jazz artists who came after him but, as Carrington relates, “Duke Ellington was very forward thinking and didn’t like labels and boxes, which is the reason why I wrote the song *No Boxes, Nor Words* on the album. He didn’t even like the word jazz.” Still, she accepts Ellington’s elegant definition of jazz: simply “freedom of expression”.



Terri Lyne Carrington (left) as a child boning up on Angela Davis’s writings... On the right, she is pictured recently with Davis herself...

Terri Lyne Carrington wholeheartedly embraces politics. On Martin Luther King, she says “We cannot let down Dr King and the dream for equality and peace. We all have to do our part in furthering this cause”.

Carrington describes the controversial political activist Angela Davis, now 73, as “iconic”, and has invited Davis to address her students at Berklee. Interestingly, Davis is as much into the music as Carrington is into politics. Writing the liner notes for Carrington’s album *Jazz Is A Spirit*, Davis writes: “In the tradition of drummers like Max Roach and Jack DeJohnette, Terri powerfully anchors the rhythm section and at the same time liberates the drum from it to lead the journey.”
