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PDX JAZZ  
FESTIVAL  
2019

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PDXjazz



FEATURED ARTISTS

RAMSEY LEWIS

STANLEY CLARKE

THE BAD PLUS

TERENCE BLANCHARD

E-COLLECTIVE

WITH DARRELL GRANT

CHRISTIAN SCOTT

AARON DIEHL TRIO

VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA

STEVE TURRE

Rahsaan Roland Kirk Tribute

FREDDY COLE

Nat King Cole at 100

CHRIS POTTER TRIO

ERIC ALEXANDER QUARTET

FEATURING HAROLD MABERN

VERONICA SWIFT FEATURING

THE BENNY GREEN TRIO

and more ...



First Take > BY ED ENRIGHT



Hamiet Bluiett (1940–2018) performs at the Moers Festival in Moers, Germany, on May 26, 1996.

# Standing up for the Bari

**MUSICALLY, HAMIET BLUIETT MADE OUTRAGEOUS** statements on the baritone saxophone. His work with the World Saxophone Quartet alone served as testament to that. Verbally, though, Bluiett sometimes spoke of a different kind of outrage—namely, the intense frustration he felt when he observed fellow musicians, bandleaders and composers treating the almighty bari as a lower form of life than other instruments commonly featured in jazz ensembles.

When Bluiett died on Oct. 4 at age 78, he left behind a legacy of always standing up for the bari. At one point in his prolific career, Bluiett formed an ensemble of four bari players—himself, Patience Higgins, Alex Harding and James Carter—backed by drummer Ronnie Burrage. Their seismic performance at the 1997 Montreal Jazz Festival is forever documented on the live album *Baritone Nation* (Justin Time).

After that show, which shook the earth below Montreal's Théâtre Gesù, Bluiett was eager to talk about the role of the bari in modern music.

"You've never heard the horn sound like this because the music is confined," he said. "You can't play the horn the way it's supposed to be played, because it's always in a support role with a bunch of other instruments. People don't know what it sounds like. It's immensely powerful."

It was the start of an insightful, enthusiastic rant that was heard by all of the bari players in the dressing room that night, myself included. Bluiett punctuated his comments with quick pulls on a joint, which might have stimulated his musings on the subject.

"Music is too high right now; they don't work on the lows," Bluiett said. "It's all 'ear' sounds. Nobody's playing in the pocket. ... The bottom now has to rule, and the people will say, 'Thank

you, good.' I think they're tired of it, too. We got notes that hit you in the ass; they're 'booty notes.' ... So, the horn can do that, and all the music these days is written for something else. And I'm tired of being subservient to it. ... I refuse to take the disrespect anymore."

Bluiett clearly saw his instrument as a force to be reckoned with, one that not only deserved more attention but practically demanded a stylistic realm of its own.

"It's like being in the water," he said. "The baritone is not a catfish, none of them small fish; it's more like a dolphin or a whale. And it needs to travel in a whole lot of water; we can't work in no swimming pools."

He suggested that the Baritone Nation group was his way of speaking out against what he perceived then as a lack of forward motion on the jazz scene.

In light of all that Bluiett accomplished, it's obvious that he made valuable contributions to the advancement of the art form. (For more information on his career, see our obituary in *The Beat*, on page 20.)

With the subsequent emergence of bari-playing improvisers and bandleaders of the highest order—contemporary artists including Carter, Gary Smulyan, Claire Daly, Charles Evans, Brian Landrus, Colin Stetson, Josh Sinton, Adam Schroeder, Lisa Parrott and dozens more—it's clear that Bluiett not only succeeded in helping to elevate the profile of the instrument itself, but he ultimately influenced today's jazz scene in a way that's noticeably more receptive to bari players in general. For that, I thank him.

Long live Hamiet Bluiett, and long live the Baritone Nation.

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