

Mike LeDonne

Taking It Up

By Eric Wendell



“A FRIEND OF MINE USED TO SAY

that jazz is a participation sport, not a spectator sport. It's a funny analogy but I thought: that's really true.” This observation perfectly describes pianist/organist Mike LeDonne's endeavors as both a sideman and as a leader. LeDonne's resumé includes stints with bandleader Benny Goodman, vibraphonist Milt Jackson and saxophonist Benny Golson as well as leading his own groups on both the piano and organ. Speaking about his career, LeDonne says, “I just want to get better. That's really all I've ever focused on. How do I get better?”

A native of Bridgeport CT, LeDonne grew up in a musical household. His father was a guitarist who ran a local music store. LeDonne began to play the piano at age five and the organ by the age of ten. Regarding his early musical experiences, LeDonne says, “We had a piano and an organ in our house. There was a record my parents used to play; a ragtime guy playing ‘Tiger Rag’ and my first thing was sort of pantomiming to that when my parents had parties.”

LeDonne's initial inspirations came from the R&B and soul-fueled sounds of Sam and Dave, Wilson Pickett and James Brown. “I loved James Brown as a kid; it communicated to me,” he says. “When it was on, I was energized. And it's that same thing with great jazz music and I think that comes from the rhythm. The human element is in that rhythm.”

Deciding that music would be his career, LeDonne attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. He originally focused on classical but began to study with jazz pianist Jaki Byard at the conservatory. On his audition with Byard, LeDonne says, “I played ‘All Blues’ or something. He was just so much fun to be around and so not like the New England Conservatory, which was stuffy and stiff.”

After graduation, LeDonne moved to New York City as a member of the Widespread Depression Jazz Orchestra. In 1982, he received an opportunity of a lifetime when he auditioned for Benny

Goodman. At age 25, LeDonne found himself playing piano with the legend. LeDonne's capacity to perform different styles won him the coveted role in Goodman's group. “With Benny Goodman, the only reason I made it through the audition was because I knew about Hank Jones, the refined sound of Teddy Wilson but I could use the language of Bud Powell,” he says.

In 1988, LeDonne released his debut album as a leader. Titled *Bout Time*, LeDonne recorded it with renowned producer Rudy van Gelder. On recording the disk, LeDonne says, “I sit down at the piano and put the headphones on, and I play a chord and there it is, the Rudy Van Gelder piano sound from all my disks on Pulse and Savoy and I'm like, ‘Wow!’”

Around the same time, LeDonne joined Milt Jackson's group as a pianist. “Milt really enjoyed me because I loved to play the blues and I love to swing,” he says. LeDonne continued to perform with him until his death in 1999. LeDonne paid homage to Jackson with the 2001 CD *Bags Groove: A Tribute to Milt Jackson*, an album that featured several of Jackson's compositions including “Namesake” and the title cut.

Since 2000, LeDonne has spent his Tuesdays playing the Hammond B3 at the Upper West Side mainstay, Smoke. Joining him weekly are the musical talents of tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander, guitarist Peter Bernstein and drummer Joe Farnsworth. Since beginning his engagement at Smoke, LeDonne has seen his organ playing get better with every gig. “I feel like I'm a real organ player now. Before I was a guy who loved the organ and always played it; but I never worked on it that much professionally. It doesn't limit me now. It's like riding a bike; it's all coordination.”

Throughout the past decade, LeDonne has found consistent inspiration in his associates, particularly saxophonist George Coleman and pianist Harold Mabern. “George Coleman, let me just say, he's my man,” he declares. “Him and Harold Mabern are beautiful people and geniuses of music, period. They have been huge influences on me in the past 10 years.”

Whatever the future may hold for LeDonne, his devotion to playing will continue to enthrall any audience member. “You can't stay in the same place, but at the same time it's got to move up,” LeDonne says. “You can't just go forward, you gotta take it up.”

Mike LeDonne's band, 5LIVE, that includes Eric Alexander (tenor saxophone), Jeremy Pelt (trumpet), John Webber (bass) and Joe Farnsworth (drums) performs at Smoke September 28-29.