

The Bass Greats

Ron Carter

By Cliff Engel

Born in 1937 near Detroit and raised in a musical family, Ron Carter's career in music began with a classically influenced background. He took up the cello at age ten and in high school learned to play violin, clarinet, trombone, and tuba. At age 17, Carter picked up the acoustic upright bass and within six months had been awarded a scholarship to the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Carter became the first black member of the Eastman-Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. After graduating with a bachelor of music degree from Eastman in 1959, Carter moved to New York where he earned his master's degree in double bass from the Manhattan School of Music in 1961. While attending the Manhattan School of Music, Carter freelanced as a bassist and cellist and played with the Chico Hamilton Quartet and a number of other musicians including Eric Dolphy, Thelonious Monk, Jaki Byard, Cannonball Adderley, and Art Farmer to name just a few.



In 1963 Carter replaced Paul Chambers as bassist of the renowned Miles Davis Quintet. Davis' classic quintet of the mid-60's is considered by many critics to not only be Davis' finest group but also one of the most influential bands in the history of music. Alongside Davis, pianist Herbie Hancock, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and drummer Tony Williams, Carter played in nightclubs and concert halls around the world and contributed to some of the most significant recordings in jazz history. With Williams, Carter anchored one of the greatest rhythm sections of all-time.

In 1968 Carter left the Miles Davis Quintet and settled permanently in New York where he began an illustrious freelance career. In the 1970's Carter developed a cello-like piccolo bass which he played as a leader of his own two-bass quartet with bassist Buster Williams. Throughout the 70's and 80's, Carter played and recorded with a "who's who" in jazz music including Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson, McCoy Tyner, Wes Montgomery, Freddie Hubbard, Horace Silver, Stan Getz, Sonny Rollins, Bill Evans, Stanley Turrentine, and Red Garland. In 1988 Carter's solo bass recording of the Bach Cello Suites was certified Gold.

Over the past five decades, Carter has received numerous awards and accolades from both critics and reader's polls alike for his contributions to jazz. Carter has been recognized by Downbeat magazine as "Jazz Bassist of the Year" and also "Most Valuable Player - Acoustic Bass" by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. He has been awarded two honorary doctorate degrees in music and is also the recipient of the prestigious Hutchinson Medal from the Eastman School of Music. In addition, Carter garnered a Grammy award in 1988 for his instrumental composition, "Call Sheet Blues", featured in the film *'Round Midnight* and in 1994 won "Best Jazz Record of the Year" for *A Tribute To Miles Davis*.

As an author of several method books on jazz bass technique and classical bass studies, Carter has shared his knowledge as an instructor and clinician at a number of schools including his alma mater, the Manhattan School of Music. Carter served as the Artistic Director of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Studies in Boston, and after 18 years on the faculty of the City College of New York where he taught as Distinguished Professor of Music, Carter retired as Distinguished Professor Emeritus.

Today, Ron Carter is recognized as one of the most prolific bassists of all-time. Having appeared as a sideman on over 3,000 recordings and on 30 projects as a leader, Carter has played some of the most harmonically and rhythmically rich lines ever captured on tape. He is a true master of bass line construction and an icon in the history of the jazz bass tradition.

As a brilliant accompanist providing the foundation for soloists, Carter's unmistakable, personal tone and selective note choice are second to none. Carter swings through chord changes, in and out of half- and double-time feels, with ease. Always aware of his musical environment, Carter spontaneously interacts both melodically and rhythmically with other members in the group. Within the framework of his solos, Carter demonstrates virtuoso technical facility and utilizes a variety of techniques including double-stops, octaves, pull-offs, hammer-ons, glissandos, and melodic horn-like runs.

By analyzing Carter's approach to jazz bass line construction, we see a number of his trademark lines and techniques. Generally speaking, Carter chooses to outline chords clearly and simply with roots or fifths on beat one of every measure. Although, at times Carter will place other chord tones such as the third on beat one, depending on the situation. Carter often outlines turnarounds (usually the last two measures of the song form) with root notes played on beats one and three and chromatic approach notes on beats two and four to heighten the underlying sense of tension and release and further propel the music forward. Carter often repeats lines from one chorus to the next to establish the harmony and also utilizes other techniques such as repetitive ostinato figures often lasting between two to four measures in length.

Not only was Carter a master craftsman of beautifully contoured melodic lines, but Carter was also a master of left hand articulations and rhythmic embellishments. Carter's extensive use of left hand articulations including pull-off skips and glissandos have become an integral part of his signature sound. Other rhythmic embellishments often employed by Carter include skips, ghost skips, triplets, slurred skips, and syncopated rhythms. Extended glissandos (slides often lasting a full measure or more) have long been recognized as a Carter trademark.

Measures 4, 12, 55, 62, and 70: Carter's trademark glissandos, often spanning a full measure or more

Measures 8, 20, 23, 35, and 58: Carter's signature pull-off skips, primarily on the D and G strings

Measures 13 and 33: Carter's patented rhythmic drops

Measures 15 and 63: Classic line used by Carter, often beginning on the fifth or root of a chord

Measures 2 and 42: Common line used by Carter, repeated an octave lower in measures 14 and 26

Measures 6 and 50: Common line used by Carter, repeated an octave higher in measures 62 and 66

Measures 37 - 40: Classic, melodically contoured line used by Carter

Measures 57 and 65 - 66: Common root/fifth/octave-based ostinato figure employed by Carter

1 F7 Bb7 F7 F7

5 Bb7 Bb7 F7 Am7 D7

9 Gm7 C7 F7 D7 Gm7 C7

13

17

21

25

29

33



37



41



45



49



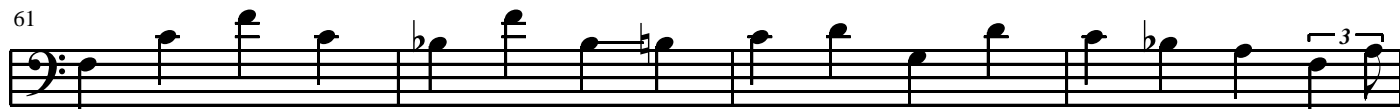
53



57



61





Selected Discography:

As A Leader

Meets Bach
Jazz, My Romance
The Bass and I
So What
Orfeu
When Skies Are Grey
Stardust
The Golden Striker

With Miles Davis

Seven Steps To Heaven
E.S.P.
Nefertiti
The Complete Concert 1964: My Funny Valentine + Four and More
Miles Smiles
Sorcerer
Miles in the Sky
Filles De Kilimanjaro
The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965
The Best of the Miles Davis Quintet 1965-1968
The Complete Columbia Studio Sessions 1965-1968

Method Books/Transcriptions

Ron Carter: Building Jazz Bass Lines
The Ron Carter Collection