

PETER GANNUSHKIN/DOWNTOWNMUSIC.NET



LARRY ROLAND

BY TYRAN GRILLO

Larry Roland is a poet of the bass and the pen with nearly four decades of professional experience across a variety of fields. After graduating from Boston University in 1973 with a BS in Education, he taught health and P.E. in the local public school system. He later earned a Master's degree in Public Health from the University of Massachusetts. All the while, he was refining his poetic voice, drawing on everyday life around him to reflect on both individual and collective pasts and continues to do so in his current home of New York City. Along the way, he found kindred solace in the upright bass, alongside which he cut his teeth as part of the house band at Wally's in Boston's South End. After touring and recording with trumpeter Raphe Malik and founding the Urge 4Tet with pianist Donal Fox, he released his first album of solo bass and spoken word, *As Time Flows On*, in 2001. Next for him was the *Bassline Motion* project with dancer/choreographer Adrienne Hawkins, plus an acclaimed record with the Charles Gayle Trio, *Streets*, in 2011. Since 2012, he has been involved in *We Free StRINGS*, a free jazz ensemble intent on dismantling the ethos of Western musical paradigms. Most recently, he put out a book of poetry, *..Just Sayin'!!*, in 2019 and in 2020 was featured on the album *We Were Here* by The Jazz & Poetry Choir Collective, of which he is a former founding member.

The New York City Jazz Record: Can you tell me a little about those early days at Wally's?

Larry Roland: That was my school, man. We played bebop—no ballads—every night from 9 pm to 2 am. We had Roy Hargrove, Antonio Hart, Tommy Campbell, Billy Kilson...you name it. And there I was, somehow ending up as the bass player.

TNYCJR: On your solo album, *As Time Flows On*, you've got this track called "The Journey", which resonates deeply during this time of pandemic. In it, you talk about the "realization of being bound" and a "serious trek for truth". Regardless of what you're playing, does that spirit animate everything you do?

LR: You see, that's the bottom line. It's the spirit. In almost everything you see going on today, the spirit has been manipulated. It's missing. There's so much fear in the world that people start craving these parameters created by someone who has a title or what have you. I say no, man, I'm just writing this stuff up. When people started asking me to participate in these 'soirees' back in college, it was very interesting to me. I was able to check out the whole class thing. I would show up with my writings folded up in a brown paper bag stuck in my belt and people would say, 'Oh, you're here!' I'd read something and people would be floored, but to me, I was just talking about life. I wasn't there to be a token entertainer, but to educate. And then I'd be kicking it in my dorm—I was an athlete, you see, a ball player at Boston University—and would share something there, too. They thought it was deep. Being taken seriously off the court by guys I rubbed shoulders

with on it was important. It put a smile on my face, because academically I was struggling.

TNYCJR: How did you channel that energy at such a formative time into a professional life, as it were?

LR: People always tell me, you should be out there, man. I say, listen, I'm just satisfied being above the ground and having a few things to say. As far as getting caught up in the race, I'm not really sure on my feet like that. I didn't go to school to learn how to play bass or write. I went to very poor public schools. And that's fine with me. I try to keep it as raw as possible without really having to answer to anyone. If it resonates and touches someone, that's a blessing for me, because I'm just a conduit.

TNYCJR: Where and how does the music fit into all of this?

LR: I grew up in a household filled with Bird, Trane, Lee Morgan, Sonny Rollins, Yusef Lateef and Stravinsky. During that time, we still had a little record store on the corner where you could find all sorts of music. Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff, Jack McDuff, I was inundated with all of that. Plus, my dad knew a lot of musicians. He and Roy Haynes were tight. So much so that my mom would get tired of seeing Roy's drums in the living room. "Put dem drums back in the hall!" she'd say. Around Christmastime, we would get these postcards from creative people all over the world. Every time I looked at them, I couldn't help but think, now that's freedom. Whenever people ask me about the most significant thing growing up that really helped shape my perception into who I am today, I always say it was the music. My dad knew these people: painters, musicians, intellectuals. They would meet in my house and break down stuff in ways I never experienced on the outside. They were all focused more on the qualitative than the quantitative. Some of the deepest stuff I heard was in my living room.

TNYCJR: In listening to your spoken word especially, I get this palpable sense that you're looking at history with clear and open eyes. Whereas the world may cut and repaste it into a different narrative, you're trying to get to the heart of it, in the same way a genealogist may draw up a family tree. How do you see yourself making a contribution?

LR: It all comes back to the spirit. People sometimes tell me, man, I've never seen anyone procrastinate as much as you; you should be doing this, that and the other. But I am doing it. You just don't see it. I'm always creating in my mind. I'm just not about trying to be up front with it and gain all the attention. This brother, Hasan Abdul-Karim, I play with sometimes—in his 80s and still blowing tenor—is really into astrology, so he offered to do my chart one time. He said, "I wish I had your stars. You don't even have to do anything. You're

linked to the universe. That's special. That's power. Spiritual power." So I walked with that. I try to stay what I call "naturonic". I try to move with nature. These days, I have a little mouse in my pantry. Most people would see him as a nuisance, but he's trying to live the same way we're trying to live. He's not trying to bring attention to himself. He respects my space and I respect his. The odds are against him. Maybe he's got a crevice behind the wall and maybe even a family he's bringing crumbs to. Maintaining that connection to the little things is how I've been able to move ahead and navigate the terrain. Just be as still as you can and your surroundings will speak to you.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 11)

The Gardenia Society



THE
BILLIE HOLIDAY
MEMORIAL
FOUNDATION
EST. 1972

Celebrate Our Music Heritage

Music Appreciation

Streaming Events & Artist Support

www.gardeniasociety.org



One Breath Rising

is proud to present our spring lineup!



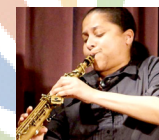
FEBRUARY 14TH
BASSIST / POET
LARRY ROLAND

MARCH 14TH
SAXOPHONIST
RAS MOSHE BURNETT
WITH POET
CHERYL BOYCE TAYLOR



APRIL 11TH
BASSIST
CHRISTOPHER DEAN SULLIVAN
WITH POET
ANGELA LOCKHART-ARONOFF

MAY 16TH
LEE ODOM,
REEDS



All performances on Sundays
at 4:40 pm via Zoom
go to our website
for registration info
\$10 donation suggested

www.onebreathrising.org

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

TNYCJR: You could say there's a difference between those who move for the mere sake of it because they don't know how to be still and those who have to be still and let the world blossom around them. You can't be attentive to the spirit, or any spirit, if you're always on the go, because you're either too busy talking down to everyone or shutting them out. We need time for cultivation.

LR: I'm doing a piece right now on technology and I keep coming back to this image of Toto pulling back the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*. That's exactly what I see going on. The mask is coming down and there's desperation out there. We have to be careful with our minds, because the proverbial THEY understand the power of hypnotism based on repetition. Sometimes I hear the classics on the radio and am reminded of how the jazz greats did so much with so little. I'm blessed to have grown up in that time. Not just around jazz, but Black music in general. Gospel, R&B and don't get me started on James Brown, now he packed the party. As soon as he came on, it was hands up. And if you didn't have anybody, you just danced with the wall. But you were still telling a story.

TNYCJR: How did this upcoming live-stream concert come about?

LR: One Breath Rising asked me and I said yes, simple as that. Since then, I've been going through the pieces in my mind, letting them grow. The fact that it takes place on Valentine's Day reminds me of a performance I did for the Provincetown Playhouse at the invitation of Regina Ress, who teaches storytelling at NYU. In that piece, I said I was "looking for an analog love in a digital world". That notion got me thinking about sound. We're living in a world of ones and zeros, kicked off with an electrical connection, but I'm used to striking something, producing vibration.

In that performance, for which I both spoke and played, I told the story of my bass, which was built in Germany in the 1840s. It was found in a bombed-out building in Berlin and no one knows how it got here. I had a chance to try it out at the luthier's shop when I was getting my plywood model fixed. That night, I couldn't sleep, all I could hear was that sound. I was in love. I ended up trading my bass for the German one and it's still my go-to instrument. I told a more detailed version of that story to an audience once and at the end these two old couples approached me and introduced themselves as German concentration camp survivors. They felt such an affinity for my bass, down to the serial number imprinted on the scroll. As I was giving them a closer look, one of the wives was patting and rubbing the bass like it was a real individual, which it is. I got really emotional. They saw a lot of people in that story and told me to keep playing. That's when I realized the gift ran both ways. You pull in things that so many others take for granted, and you magnify them. This is who we are.

TNYCJR: Speaking of sound, I can't help but feel like you're reciting poetry when you're playing bass and playing bass when you're reciting poetry.

LR: I'll walk with that, too. I live an improvisational lifestyle. Whatever I don't do today, I'll do the next time.

TNYCJR: Finally, I'd like to go back to the beginning of your relationship with the bass.

LR: I didn't pick the bass up until I was 30. When I did, I already knew how I wanted it to sound and where I would go with it. Back then, I was getting poetry gigs in Boston when I ran into a bassist by the name of John Jamyll Jones. We were having a Black History Month program and I wanted him to accompany me while

I read. The performance was even shown on PBS under the name *Say Brother*. After that I joined his band, Worlds, reciting poetry and playing a little percussion. They had two bassists, one of whom pursued other paths in life and sold me his bass. At first, I just had it in the living room, but then I would put on John Coltrane's *Ascension* and start playing along with it. I felt like part of the band. Jamyll showed me the rudiments: how to hold the instrument and plant my feet properly. Then I got some books on fingering and such. I practiced every night. I just wanted to play. I never met my teachers: Jimmy Garrison, Ron Carter, Paul Chambers and Palle Danielsson. Then, a guy from Berklee who'd heard me play called me about joining him at Wally's. He needed someone fast, so I took the risk and developed from there. Aside from studying a bit with Cecil McBee, I was largely self-taught. It was always about the music. It saved my life. I was a listener before I was a player and I'm still listening. ❖

For more information, visit ogijaz.com. Roland live-streams Feb. 14 at onebreathrising.org.

Recommended Listening:

- World's Experience Orchestra – *The Beginning Of A New Birth/As Time Flows On* (World Productions – Now Again, Now Again, 1975/77)
- Raphe Malik 5tet – *21st Century Texts* (FMP, 1991)
- Dennis Warren's Full Metal Revolutionary Jazz Ensemble – *Watch Out!* (Accurate, 1996)
- Larry Roland – *As Time Flows On* (Boston Composers Group, 2001)
- Charles Gayle – *Streets* (Northern Spy, 2011)
- Steve Cohn/Daniel Carter/Larry Roland/Marvin Bugalu Smith – *Voyager* (Tube Room, 2018)

(ENCORE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8)

Franklin and Burnett have been working in a new trio with pianist Robert Turner, revisiting the foot-tapping positive vibes they felt while working with Harris. This trio recently released a recording of one of their most recent performances from February 2020, *Live at the Gardenia Club* by 3 More Sounds.

Otherwise, 2020 has been quieter than usual, of course. He's done a couple record dates and some live-streaming concerts. This new year kicks off with more recording, including an exciting sextet that Franklin has lined up with Nolan Shaheed (trumpet), Teodross Avery (tenor), Ryan Porter (trombone), Theo Saunders (piano) and Willie Jones III (drums). He's worked with them all before separately in various situations. When asked if he had plans to perform with that band he said no. "Those guys are so busy individually I thought if I could get them together once...Willie's very busy, he lives in New York. Teodross is very busy in L.A. and wherever he's at he's got his own thing happening. Ryan Porter plays with Kamasi [Washington] and when they get started they're going to be on the road all the time. Nolan's pretty busy with his studio. I don't think we're gonna get together again. On an ideal day I'd love to perform with that group, but no plans." ❖

For more information, visit sprecords.com

Recommended Listening:

- Hugh Masekela – *The Promise of a Future* (UNI, 1968)
- Henry Franklin – *The Skipper* (Black Jazz, 1971)
- Henry Franklin – *Tribal Dance* (Catalyst, 1977)
- Dennis Gonzalez New Dallas Quartet – *Stefan* (Silkheart, 1986)
- Azar Lawrence – *Prayer For My Ancestors* (Furthermore, 2008)
- 3 More Sounds (Henry Franklin/Robert Turner/Carl Burnett) – *Live at The Gardenia Club* (Skipper Prod., 2017)

Kites and Strings

Ben Rosenblum
Nebula Project



"Music doesn't get any more beautiful than this."

- Robert Nicosia
(Music Man)



www.benrosenblummusic.com