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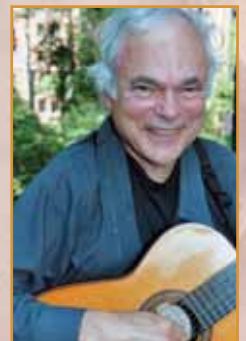
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Publisher: Eric Nemeyer

Editor: Winthrop Bedford

Advertising Sales & Marketing: Jamie Cosnowsky

Circulation: Ellen Kahn, Susan Brodsky

Photo Editor: Joe Patitucci

Interns: Kaila Prins, Dmitry Ekshtut

Contributing Photographers: Norm Harris, Gene Martin, Eric Nemeyer, Joe Patitucci, E.S. Proteus, Herb Snitzer, Ken Weiss.

Contributing Writers: Dan Adler; Mark Ament; Dan Bilawsky; Al Bunshaft; John Coco; Bill Donaldson; Dmitry Ekshtut; Joe Ferrari; Ken Franckling; Eric Frazier; Larry Gelb; Robert Gish; Ira Gitler; C.J. Glass; Dr. Wayne Goins; Clive Griffin; Rick Helzer; Dennis Hollingsworth; Steve Jankowski; Joe Knipes, Jan Klinecicz; Walter Kolosky; Carla Lillien; Dave Miele; Mercy Monet; Jerry O'Brien; Joe Patitucci; Marco Pignataro; Jim Santella; Ron Scott; Mark Sherman; Annie Simmons; MJ Territo; Ken Weiss; Marshall Zucker.

Advertising Sales

Contact Jamie Cosnowsky at 212-889-0853

Jazz Improv® Magazine Main Office

107-A Glenside Avenue, Glenside, PA 19038 USA

Telephone: 215-887-8808; Fax: 215-887-8803

Email: jazz@jazzimprov.com

Website: www.jazzimprov.com

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Eric Frazier**

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Eric Frazier

Interview by Winthrop Bedford

Who is Eric Frazier? He is the artist who appears on the cover of this issue of *Jazz Improv's New York Jazz Guide*? But why? There are so many deserving artists and supporters of jazz in New York alone, who merit a cover feature. Well, he's a musician, an industry participant, a business professional, a writer, an interviewer, a composer, a recording artist, a vocalist, a conga player, a promoter, a marketer, an educator and more. Yeah, so? Aren't there a lot of deserving independent artists? Yes. Aren't there a lot of people like Eric? I don't know. Aren't there a lot of independent artists like him? Maybe. You'll have to make that decision for yourself.

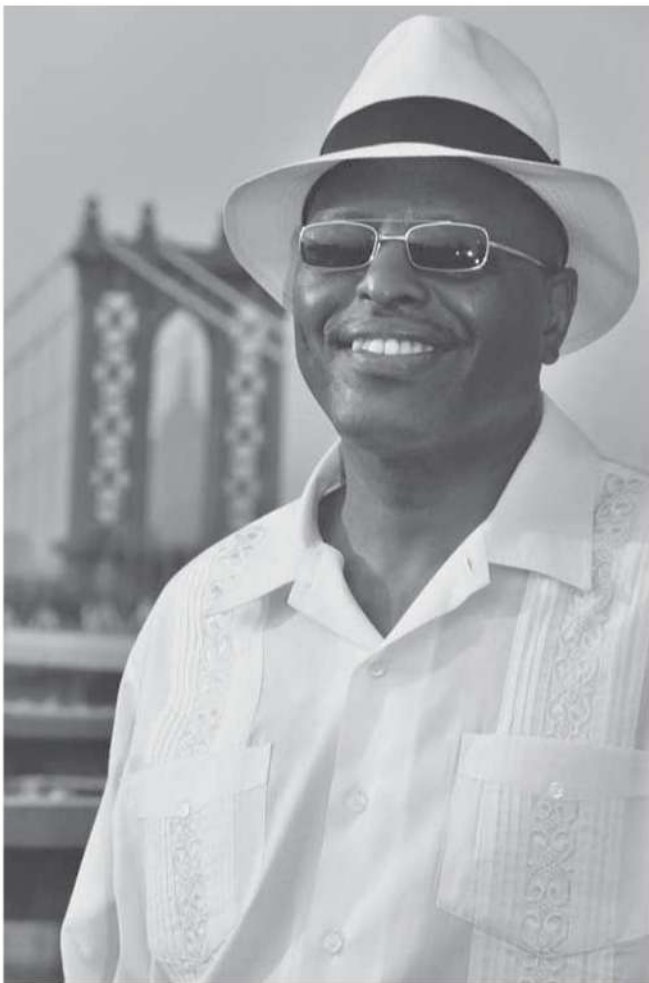
In the meantime, Eric Frazier is a beacon of positive thinking. He works to book his group, run jam sessions and participates in other people's sessions. His inclusive attitude is one that is a model that we all need to embrace to develop community and to develop opportunities. His efforts have opened up the doors and generated gigs for others who weren't working — or working enough.

There may be more technically schooled musicians than Eric Frazier. There are artists who compose and have all the theory in the world compared to Eric, who simply sings what he hears. We all have to do things in our own inimitable ways, overcoming our weaknesses by turning them into our own unique voices, and selling points, or otherwise recruiting other's expertise. Irving Berlin had a piano rigged up so he could shift keys while he played everything in C. When Eric can't do something, he is savvy at finding people that can do what he cannot or does not do—like any successful leader.

Eric has an incredible "can-do" attitude. Perseverance is a quality to be admired and not underestimated. And there are several concepts that support the benefits of perseverance and patience. (1) The cliché is that today's janitor is tomorrow's vice president. (2) Another idea is that "some of those who achieved success in life, didn't show evidence of their special gifts and talents earlier in life." (3) Another understanding that we embrace as artists is that this is a lifelong pursuit—where unlike athletes who often peak at age 35 or 40, creative musicians continue to grow and evolve, if we so choose, and work at it throughout our lives, eventually reaching levels of subtlety that we

could never have imagined when we started out. (4) When we underestimate people, we can never see or perceive the intense and invisible level of perseverance and patience that they may have developed, and which is hidden within the vast universe of their own conscious awareness and the synapses of their brains.

It is rare that Eric Frazier is not smiling, or giving, or having a kind word for someone. Essentially, he is a model for what a good attitude can do in terms of developing relation-



music is quite unconventional. I sing or hum out a melody on a tape recorder and then follow this process by singing out the parts for each instrument. I will generally start with the bass because as a dancer the bass line was always the first element to capture my fancy. I use to go to so many dancing parties that it gave me an idea of what people who like to dance look for in their music. This is important to me because I endeavor to sort of re-align Jazz and dancing as it was done in the days, where you could find seven to ten thousand or more people dancing to jazz bands similar to what you might find in the hey day of the swing era. I actually use swing dancers in some of my shows at present. So, I look to make music that incorporates and stimulates all of the types of dancing including traditional jazz dancing, salsa, hip hop, calypso, reggae, raggaeton, waltz, foxtrot etc... I believe that this approach is not only good for the people, but it also has a positive impact on the total sales revenue for jazz CD's. We are currently at one percent of all total records sales when you look at record sales for the music industry as a whole. I took a minor in economics in college and it's paying off in my approach and perspective on what I am doing. Once I set the bass line down, I would then do the parts for the piano, horns and drums the same way. There are always exceptions. Sometimes I would start with the horns or piano and some times I would construct conga part at a rehearsal. When all of the parts are done, I have them transcribed and written up in musical notation. David Lee Jones, who plays alto, soprano sax and flute, does the transcriptions and horn harmonies. David is also the music director.

ships, opportunities. Tired of hearing griping about who and what doesn't work in the music? Talk to Eric Frazier and he'll tell you what he does. Or, he'll tell you to invest your time working on your dreams, instead of complaining about what didn't happen, or isn't happening.

This is who Eric Frazier is!

JJ: Tell us about how you compose music?

EF: I guess my *modus operandi* for composing

JJ: What kinds of practice and commitment did you undertake to develop your skills as a percussionist, Conga and Djembe drummer and on the other drums you play?

EF: I read where Trane would spend ten, twelve hours a day practicing. That is a yard-

Hear **Eric Frazier** at his
CD Release Party
at Cecil's on Saturday evening
July 29, 2006

Check out Eric's other recordings.

Visit **Eric** on the web at
www.ericfraziermusic.com

stick that is very hard to follow these days; but I do believe in that type of commitment. I have spent as much as seven hours at times. Right now I find the most important thing is to get something in every day because there are times when you can get nothing in. I found that as time goes by (didn't Booby short become famous for this song)? There is a struggle to keep the same attention on the craft itself. If you are independent which means you are the executive, the manager, booking agent, band leader, publicist, marketer, promoter, secretary, clerk, computer technologist — I'll leave out some because you are getting the idea and then I'll throw in musician... Okay, so now you get the picture — you don't get the time you want or need as a musician. That is why the team is needed. I am currently in the process of refilling the core team.

JJ: Could you talk about how your concepts and artistry has developed over the past few years, and what you've learned from the creation of your previous several albums?

EF: Over the past several years I have gotten more technical in my approach to music. The past years of experience have enabled me to develop clearer goals and objectives and to focus on why I am doing what I do and what I would like the outcomes to be. First, my concepts regarding music involve incorporating the generations. Anything that has been successful and withstood the test of time has done this. All of the organizations, institutions and businesses that have been around since the flood have done well in this area. You can find this in fraternities, sororities and some churches as well. They know how to attract, stimulate and inspire young people and old people. They know how to create an environment where there is experience passed on, new things developed, and a sense of self-actualization through involvement and shared and enriched experiences through everyone's exposure to the bottom line of the group. My translation of this concept is this. When I see that early-childhood-age kids, adolescent-aged kids, teenagers, young adults, adults and senior citizens like my music then I know I'm on the right track. This has happened. I am so thrilled when young people by my music as the first Jazz CD in their collection. In fact, my pitch to

them is that I want my CD to be the first one in their Jazz collection. That is an honor! It makes feel that I am reaching them and in effect helping to expand the industry in a minute way. I learned about most of the Jazz artists' music I have today from my college days and I have grown with, and purchased their music over the years. We all do that. That is why you have to play different clubs; especially, those at the very top of the Jazz world, so that the music doesn't die when you die. I have learned so many things since my first CD *Count Your Blessings* (1996). The first thing I learned was how much I did not know. The second thing I learned was the meaning of commitment. Is this what I really wanted to do? And how far was I willing to go to see it through. When the answer came to me—that I would go to the end of the earth to make it happen—I understood commitment. The third thing I learned was how unprepared I was. I began to study and read about bandleaders, entertainers and entertainment. I researched artists, music equipment, venues, markets, demographics, the history of record labels (In many instances some feel they are responsible for changing Jazz to more of a listening phenomena than the dancing attraction it used to be and as a result played a large roll in the decline of the market value and market share of Jazz.), distribution, publicity, public relations, audience development and advertisement. I began to take singing lessons with Enos Payne, a well known New York City musician and instructor. Enos helped me standards and R&B songs. I took voice lessons with Lenny Green, a choir conductor and voice instructor from the churches of Brooklyn and Queens, New York. He has helped me to use my voice in ways yet to be demonstrated in future recordings. I credit these two gentlemen in helping me to make the change from being strictly a conga player to becoming a bona fide vocalist. The fourth thing I learned was that no matter how resourceful I was, I couldn't do everything myself. So I had to develop a cadre of people to help. Consequently, my life took on a change. I could no longer spend the time I use to spend with family and friends. I could no longer make the social events I use to make. Everything was connected to the music. I changed my whole wardrobe and my net working "M.O." I began to carry a brief case with business cards and flyers everywhere I went. People I knew began to get sick and tired of me because they knew what was coming out of my mouth. They knew the script before I said a word. That was the beginning of it. I felt I was making headway when that started happening because the last person I saw that did the same thing became a multi-millionaire. His name was G. W. King. He became one of the top people in the Amway Corporation. These things and more, have helped me to use time more efficiently, increase my focus, enhance my business acumen and build my artistry. I have learned a lot about myself including stepping outside of my

comfort zone to grow. I went from a motto of "have a good time on stage" to "be sure to act a fool on stage." It has brought me closer to the entertainer that I want to bring out. I was an education executive in my previous life, so you can see that this is a broad change for me.

JJ: Tell us about the development of your new album, your selection of personnel, repertoire, and the production process.

EF: The objectives for my new CD "In Your Own Time" which will come out in the middle of July were to record various genres of music: (1) because people listen to various genres of music at home. (2) because I like to make music that I would listen to at home when I use to make my own personal tapes (3) it enabled me to expand my vocal repertoire into blues and R&B and get closer to the salsa I want to play and, (4) it enabled me to reach markets in various genres for television and radio. The selection of personnel was key. I had to select people who I felt were going to be a fit with my vision of how the music should be presented. David Lee Jones help to implement my vision as the musical director for the band. He interpreted for the fellows how their parts connected and gave them queues on when to begin certain segments. The recording session included the following musicians: Danny Mixon, a very bluesy and gifted piano player who played with Betty Carter, Frank Foster, the Mingus Band and scores of other great people. Jeremy Pelt, trumpet, has played with Roy Hargrove, Ravi Coltrane, Cassandra Wilson, Bobby Short, Nancy Wilson and many more. He appeared on my two previous recordings, *Smile Inside Your Soul* and *Find Yourself Then Find Me*. Stanley Banks, bass, played for over thirty years with George Benson. Maurice Brown, trumpet) a young and gifted musician who's CD *Hip to Bop* ranked in the top ten on radio ratings across the country in 2004. Some artist he has played with include Lenny White, Curtis Fuller, Jon Faddis, Ellis Marsalis, Lonnie Plaxico, Mulgrew Miller, and Jeff "Tain" Watts, and Elvin Jones. Alvin Atkinson, drummer, has recorded with Eric Alexander, Ernie Andrews and Eric Reed among others. Luis Arona, Latin Bass. I heard him a couple of times at the La Maganette (50th & 3rd Avenue in Manhattan), where they used to have salsa every Wednesday. He was great! Rick Wayacan, percussion. I heard him at LQ (511 Lexington Ave. NYC) during a fundraising event for the great pianist Hilton Ruiz, who had passed away shortly after. I asked Rick to record with me the next day. Christopher Robinson, vocals, was introduced to me by Maurice Brown. He possesses a wonderful voice. We went into the studio the next day. We recorded everything in one day. I used the next two days to add two pieces and mix the CD. I added one final day of mixing and the master was then ready for reproduction. During the mixing process I had Graphic Designer, Tony Romain working on the CD de-

"To make the right choices in life, you have to get in touch with your soul. To do this, you need to experience solitude, which most people are afraid of, because in the silence you hear the truth and know the solutions."

— Deepak K. Chopra

sign and the CD insert. I had already given him the text layout for the CD.

JJ: What kinds of things do you hope members of your band will provide for you that will ensure that you are at your most creative?

EF: I like my band to have energy because energy is contagious. It is also transferable from musician to musician and person to person in the audience. This enhances my creativity and the whole presentation of the show.

JJ: Could you cite one or more experiences or conversations you have had with some of the wonderful musicians with whom you have performed, that have made a significant impact upon you, or that have provided you with some greater awareness or understanding thereafter (for example Reggie Workman, Danny Mixon, Jack McDuff, Pharaoh Sanders or anyone else).

EF: Reggie Workman was always a wonderful person and very nice to me. I've known Reggie since the days of the Muse when he was the director of the institution. Musicians came from all over the city to learn music and work on their skills. In the early '70's, I re-

"I always wanted to sing. ...when I first began, members in my early band would say, 'no please don't sing!' Some of my friends told me just to stick with the congas. I absolutely paid them no attention, received my on stage embarrassment and kept working at it. Everyone gave up trying to change my mind because they saw it wasn't going to happen."

member playing with Reggie on this big stage they had set up outside for a Jazz Festival sponsored by Muse. It was the first time I ever played with him. I remember two brothers playing with us, Andrei (drums) and Ricky (alto sax) Strobert, well-known Brooklyn musicians. Every time I ever saw Reggie after that we always shared very a warm greeting. I didn't even think he would remember me. We talked on the telephone on occasion through the years and began to keep closer contact after getting together to take pictures with all of the Brooklyn Jazz artist similar to the photo entitled "A Great day in Harlem" in the 1950's. When Reggie agreed to do the latest recording with me, I was ecstatic. Reggie is on many

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great albums with John Coltrane that I love. Danny Mixon is "Mr. Sportin' Life" to me. That was the fellow who dressed very well in the movie *Porgy and Bess*. Danny can dress! You should see him in his hats! He told me "Always dress properly for your gigs. This is what keeps the respect of the music and the musicians alive." I remember what he said every time I do a gig. Danny played with the great Betty Carter for many years and as well with the Mingus Band and so many of the great musicians of our day. I am honored to have him on my recording and to play in my band. I played with Jack McDuff at a place in Orange, New Jersey called The Peppermint lounge. I don't think I have seen him without his hat on. It was his trademark. We had a great time. It was George Benson's birthday. He came in and stayed a good while. I gave him my first CD *Count Your Blessing*. This had to be around 1998. He was looking at the cover and I had him put it in his jacket pocket before it got lost in the party celebration and I haven't seen George since then, so if he reads this he'll remember how he got the CD! I had about five or six albums of Pharaoh. I loved his music. I finally got to play with him at Pratt College in Brooklyn, New York. I was playing the bata drum, a big two headed drum you play with sticks or your hands. Pharaoh was very open and encouraging. He made it easy to enjoy what we were doing. I was on a bill with Max Roach in 1998. Max sang a song, but did not play the drums. When I finished doing a solo conga piece, Max completely surprised me by going up to the mic and saying to the audience that they savor the moment; they were in the midst of a great conga player. It was a wonderful feeling to hear someone as accomplished as him say that.

JJ: Could you talk about the importance of making your own opportunities?

EF: Life has it's own script. You can go by what is already set or you can write your own script as you go. When you make your own opportunities you are leaving very little to chance. You are also increasing your odds for

success. My dad, Gilbert, 84, use to say you could always make a dime in New York. I understood that at an early age. I came up as a youngster earning money by going to the store for people, shining shoes, selling papers, selling salve (who didn't?), packing groceries, selling encyclopedias, during college, and working different jobs. By the time I was in the third grade, I already knew I was going to college whether my family had money or not. No one talked to me about college then. I simply read about people who went to college. That's how I got the idea. I was old school. That meant you make your breaks. Don't wait for any one to give you anything!

JJ: How does making your own opportunities enable you to maintain a positive outlook on your endeavors in the music business and life in general?

EF: When you make your own opportunities it's something you have initiated that has brought you a semblance of success. Success breeds motivation and confidence, which in turn facilitates a healthy perspective on life that can be termed as a positive attitude. Things have to be prioritized in order to bring clarity to life's endeavors. It is the positive outlook that allows one to make their own opportunities. It means that if you are not successful in an opportunity you have made, you simply go to the alternative plan b, or plan c, or d. Each of these plans represents an opportunity. Surround yourself with alternatives.

JJ: How did your work as an educator contribute to your development of such qualities as patience and perseverance?

EF: I learned patience and perseverance growing up. It was there before I became an educator. Implementing those qualities is what helped to make me an effective educator.

JJ: What kinds of challenges have you faced, whether social or business interactions, or developing your skills How have you worked to overcome them?

EF: I have worked to overcome challenges by getting solutions. I came up in a low-income single parent household for most of my formative years. My mom was 14 years old when she left high school as a senior. She got married and started a family. There were eight brothers and sisters. My dad left and she raised us by herself. Things were tough. I woke up in the middle of the night one evening because I smelled gas. I am thankful to God for waking me up because my mom had turned the gas on and sat by the oven. That's how tough things had gotten. I turned the gas off and sat with her. I repeated something to her that she had once told me earlier. I said things can only get so bad that they can't get any worse. It can only get better. My mom smiled and hugged me without saying a word. I will never know what impact that had on her because we never spoke about it again, but my mom went on to

working at it. Everyone gave up trying to change my mind because they saw it wasn't going to happen. Then sometimes we would play just instrumental music and the band began to ask if I was going to sing a song. I couldn't believe they were asking! I have to pay homage to some people. Tulivu Donna Cumberbatch, a wonderful vocalist told me years ago, "You can sing. Just take your time." Lonnie Youngblood, a great entertainer and a beautiful person told me, "What ever you do just sing, man!" Grady Tate, the great drummer and singer told me, "It sounds good, looks good, it is good, go with it!" There is a picture of Grady and me on my website. The greatest of all was my brother Ron. He sang and toured with The Crest, a vocal group from the early 60's. Their big hit was "16 Candles." Ron told me all about his experiences as a performer and encouraged me when no one else would. I

EF: Make your opportunities. Construct your world. Be your own person. Don't wait for someone to give you a job. Make a job. Go to a venue that you like and that you think has potential. For example: a venue with good location but no people in the venue. Get in there and play for nothing. Invite people and promote it—this one place. It can't be a hole in a wall. It must be a place with potential. You will be doing audience development and helping to build a clientele. If your product is even halfway decent eventually you will get a crowd. It might take a year. When it happens it will be well worth it. You will have great rapport with the owners and a good marriage. They will have steady customers and you will have a steady gig. Bobby short stayed at the Carlyle for over 30 years. He made that gig. Remember the ground rules!

"Opportunity says a lot more about initiative than it does about competition. There is no competition. It's whether you will entertain the next alternative or not."

get her high school diploma. She then began taking government tests. She got a ridiculously high mark on a test and then got a government job. We began to get allowances and became middle class. My mom and dad got back together again and bought a house. I always read a lot at a young age. I began to read everything I could get my hands. That was my approach

t o overcoming challenges. It enabled me to be resourceful and find many ways to get things done. I had the old school work ethic to add to that and it pretty much gave me what I needed to overcome obstacles. I can't go without mentioning a strong faith in God.

JJ: What words of encouragement or support, from one or more influential artists, have you received that has inspired you and or expanded your awareness or understanding of the music or human nature?

EF: I always wanted to sing. I have to tell you that when I first began members in my early band would say no please don't sing! Some of my friends told me just to stick with the congas. I absolutely paid them no attention, received my on stage embarrassment and kept

listened to his every word because what said always worked. He would tell me straight up what I needed to hear regarding feedback. During that year and actual time of the recording I looked after him while he battled cancer. I did nothing but look after him and do music. It was the most challenging and beautiful time of my life. My mom and my brother had cancer at the same time. My mom died of cancer in March of 2004. She was very happy about what I was doing with my brother. Her last words to me were "God bless you son." It will ring in my mind forever! I moved Ron to a nursing home in his last months. Strangely enough his roommate was the great pianist Jimmy Sigler. Jimmy was a pianist for Dinah Washington, Frank Sinatra, Sara Vaughn, Nancy Wilson, Dakota Staton, Gloria Lynn and many of the great divas. Jimmy's last gig was with my band as we backed up singer Marguerite Mariama (with whom he did his last recording) at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, New York. Amazingly, Ron sang "Round Midnight" for Jimmy, his wife, the nurse and myself. Every time I visited Ron it took me some place I had never been before. I enjoyed every minute. Jimmy past away in September of 2004, and in Ron October 2004.

JJ: Compared to years ago, there are fewer venues to play jazz, and more participants competing for these more limited opportunities. One jazz radio personality lamented about the deluge of daytime calls received from musicians complaining about the scene, or about a competitor who they believe is less talented or experienced than they are, but nonetheless getting the gig over them. How would you respond to this? How would you turn this negative perspective or energy into positive?

JJ: What do you say to those who complain that they do not get enough opportunity?

EF: Exactly what we have been saying. Make your own opportunities. We have given some examples of how to do it. Now that your thought processes are clicking you can make up your own examples!

JJ: When you have experienced having the door closed on you, losing an opportunity to someone else, what have you done to mentally and emotionally condition yourself to be able to move forward, capitalize on the situation, and otherwise grow?

EF: When one door closes another is sure to open. Opportunity says a lot more about initiative than it does about competition. There is no competition. It's whether you will entertain the next alternative or not.

JJ: I've observed you handle some very difficult situations and some very irritating, irritable and difficult people. How do you manage to keep yourself on such an even keel under these circumstances? What do you do to recover quickly from the toxicity?

EF: Everyone is different. If someone is irritable or negative that's the way they are. It has nothing to do with me. I will either find another way to handle the situation or leave it alone. In any event, I am not like that so I wouldn't go there with them. This is New York. You can't let some one's toxicity effect you or you'll end up like a basket case. Never forget Paul Winchell. He said there are 16 million people in New York and every one of them has a story. I'll stick to mine.

JJ: One of the maxims that successful business people embrace is the importance of knowing every aspect of their business. Some people even stress the importance of having, at one time or another, done each of the tasks in-

(Continued on page 56)

"Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true."

-Demosthenes



Having a good time at the JVC Jazz Festival Kickoff Party at Gracie Mansion, Monday June 12 - Joe Lovano, Ralph Lalama, Jon Faddis

(Continued from page 44)

volved in the operation of their business. For a successful artist, this can mean managing the activity of others who might be working for them, or otherwise doing everything themselves, from booking, negotiating contracts, sales, advertising, writing letters, ad copy, telephone, mail and e-mail marketing, producing recordings and videos, getting distribution, airplay, publicity, in addition to composing performing and practicing to maintain and expand skills. How does wearing many hats work for you? What works and what is challenging?

EF: Well, wearing many hats can certainly wear you down over time. It is better to bring others into the fold to help. You will then not be involved as much, in all of the nuances of details and implementation of everything. Instead, your roll will shift to that of training and managing. I am at that stage now where I want some one to manage the operation. I can only salivate over what impact it would have to be freed up to focus even more on the artistry.

Jl: What kind of suggestions do you have about winning friends and influencing people?

EF: I believe you accomplish both things by

doing what you do. It's natural. People know more about you than you could ever think, so you have to be who you are.

Jl: One of the things I admire about you is that you are a true optimist. How have you developed this perspective, which permeates everything you do?

EF: It's based on life experiences, successes, study, love. Faith in god and family. I have already won my wars in life. This is gravy and a piece of cake...smile!

Jl: What do you have to say to talented people who are weighted down by petty jealousies and negative thoughts?

EF: Get a life. Enrich yourself. Search your inner soul and find your passion in life. What is it that really and truly makes you happy? What is it that you can do that can lead you on a path to happiness? Sit down and list them. Prioritize them. Discuss them. You deserve it. Do you think you have worked hard enough yet to take the time to do this? If you play music, write, act, dance or are in the arts you are doing something that you obviously like. Your passions made lead to other areas don't be afraid to explore. We only go around once.

Don't waste time with petty meaningless actions. Do your thing and that thing will do something for you.

Jl: *Find Yourself And Then Find Me* is the name of one of your albums. That's a healthy perspective to embrace when entering into a personal relationship, or when developing one's talent or skills to be ready for those gigs, or those opportunities that we each may want. Could you elaborate?

EF: Take the time to know how to heal yourself. Take the time to do the things you need to do to stay on an even keel or to keep in a level playing field. It may be eating right, getting your proper rest, getting some spiritual uplifting or finding peace within yourself. What ever it is, take the time to do it. You will find your relationships are better, your interactions with others are better, and your life is better in general. I will look for you in my audiences. I will know you by the smile...

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Eric Frazier Schedule for July 2006

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Grady Tate

Interview taken by Eric Frazier

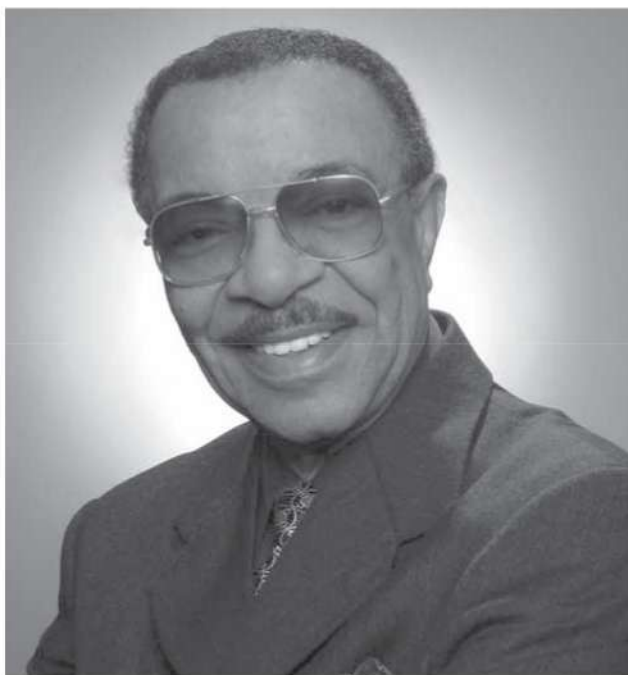
Grady Tate was as wonderful as the songs that he sings and the music he has played for so many years. He was gracious, candid, filled with love and a strong sense of fulfillment as he pondered his rich experiences and let us share with him the very things we can only obtain from "the horses mouth," the way he lived it, straight a head! Here is Grady's perspective on life and the pursuit of happiness as a drummer and vocalist.

Grady Tate: I can't think of anything that would have propelled my career as a performer any more than it turned out to be. I didn't really know what I was involved in when it all began. I didn't know anything about the recording process. I came from a small town in Durham, North Carolina. We had a couple of musicians there, a couple joints and no recording facilities that I was aware of. When I came here, it was after I had spent a lot of time in the service I did years four years. I can't think of anything that would have propelled me any faster or any further. I had an idea of something that I wanted to happen from the time I was about 14 or 15 years old. I didn't know what it was but I knew I wanted to do what I ended up doing and that's playing the drums. I wanted to sing before that but I had lost my voice. You know how kids voices change. That made me so angry until I wouldn't try to sing. I started off with Wild Bill Davis when I played the drums. I would talk with the guys in the band on what the city was about. I got many of the answers I needed. Things just began to snowball. It was impossible not to know that I was into something with the number of recordings I did and the people I recorded with. I would have been an idiot if I hadn't known who I was working with and the importance of it all. That just gave me further impetus to do more. I didn't want to do this and stop here and do that and stop there or go out on the road with another person. No, I found out how lucrative it was and stayed right at home. All of the studios had drums. I'd take my trap case if I wanted to because in many of the studios I knew their equipment so well, I didn't have to take a trap case. It was quite easy. I didn't know how it was for other people but it was a succession of very positive things for me. All of the people I played with were great musicians and that enabled me to learn, to learn, to learn to learn!

I had thousands of wonderful experiences playing with wonderful musicians. There were a couple of a - - holes but that's to be expected. There were so many others who were

very nice man! Music is what they wanted to do. They didn't come there to pick on you; you know, like if they wanted something from you they weren't getting.

I honestly don't have a special moment that I recall that might suggest this was the most important thing to me because it was all special. Every time I sat down I was sitting in front of the best musicians in the world. I didn't have a favorite this or favorite that; so I wasn't at the point where I would say, "Oh man, I played with my favorite artist!" All of those cats were bad. They were so gentle and understanding. They seemed to be as happy with me as I was with them.



I found out during my tenure in the air force that I could sing again. My voice had come back. There was a feeling of joy and happiness when I found out that I could sing a little. I would sing to myself. I would sing to recordings. There were guys in the band who would sit down and play and play several tunes for me and I'd have that to play with. I was one of the people who was on first call. I played so much I felt that I had worn myself out. I didn't feel that I was accomplishing anything more in terms of the artistry of the instrument (drums). I never wanted to be the flashy drummer to play all the slick things. I just wanted to play something that would complement whoever it was that was on the microphone. That was one of the things I enjoyed about big band playing because there was so much for the drummer to do. You didn't have to be so careful about how you played. You would listen to that entire phrasing and know what to do. So it was rather easy and quite fulfilling but when you played with a small

group then you really had to concentrate on each individual performer. If you played that way with a pianist he could feel your drowning him out or that's not where he wants to go. I ended up playing with people so I could anticipate where they wanted the drummer to go. They seem to have found out that I was for them not for me. That made it quite comfortable. Then after having done so much work, I just kind of burned out; especially, when I sang a tune and heard it back. I said, "Oh, my love is back;" my voice. The voice being the most direct means of communication made it even more important that I try to sing. I got to a point where I didn't have to work in order to survive. What little

money I made I put away or invested and was quite comfortable. So, I could concentrate on the vocal thing. That's what I've been doing for the past fifteen years. I started before that but those were little sets. Now, I'm going all out and I can sing. I know the repertoire. I know the tunes. I've listened to all of the singers. I know what they do. I just try to equal that. In certain instances I have. In certain instances I've been disappointed in what I did but for the most part I've enjoyed it. I said to myself alright, that's a great beginning. Now go forth, I'm doing so much better. Each time I sing now I'm doing better and better and better. Recently, I performed at the Atlanta Jazz Festival. That was one of the best series of tunes that I have done. I enjoyed it and I felt comfortable. I had great musicians with me. Everything I have done has been quite unusual to me. I worked with the most incredible players in the world never dreaming that this would come to fold; working with Quincy (Jones) for all

those years and the big band. He had nothing but a band of stars and contractors. When the band wasn't working. They would call me in to do their recordings with whom ever it was that they were pushing. All great cats, man. Most importantly, they were gentleman and very nice people. They knew so much about so many things. It was a learning process to hear the older musicians talking about what they had experienced and what they had seen. I know there are some people who play with musicians and they want to say something. "Aw man he's a good player but when he's off the band stand he's a real a...hole." (We had a good laugh!) That's not what it's about. You are going to find some weird people no matter where you go. There are

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doctors, physicians who don't like certain other physicians because they are a little strange or what ever it is. It's the same thing with musicians. People like to say nasty things about a person they may admire simply because that person can do something perhaps that they wanted to do and could not do. I can't even remember something that would be worth mentioning from a negative point of view. All of my experiences have been very positive and things that I have enjoyed immensely. I'm quite happy. In my life, if I died now, I'd still be happy! (We had a great laugh when I asked Grady if he had any embarrassing moments and he said yeah! Hanging out with my manager, Ron is embarrassing me. Ron was sitting there with us so we laughed and laughed some more.) Almost every gig I worked has been a very rewarding experience. I go through my CD's and look at the people on them and think about the fun and caliber

of musicians and say to myself, oh what an experience to sit down and play with those great people every day!

It's always as though it just happened. It's so good! God gave me a pair of ears and a pair of eyes. I looked at everything and I heard everything. The way I heard them seemed to be the way the people I was working with wanted me to hear them, so that I could contribute to what ever it was that they were doing. When you came to grips with the fact that there was no margin for error, you sought of knuckled down. You can't make a mistake you've got to be perfect. I've enjoyed this stuff!

Hundreds of people inspired me to sing. I loved Billy Ekstine. I knew all of his tunes. I got to work with him. I would play with him night after night, concert after concert and he was always brand new! The voice was just magnificent. His approach to it was just perfect. I loved Arthur Prysock. I loved so many singers I can't even remember them all but if you begin to name singers I can tell you about them because I studied them all. I listened to what did. I listened to how they presented their subject matter. I don't want to sing anything that even remotely suggests hate or anger. That's not what it's about. All the good things, that's what I want to sing about. The first good thing is down-right, street getting, emotional and involved love. That's the only thing I want to sing about. I don't want to sing about unrequired love or some one who didn't love me. I want to sing about some body that loved me. My mother loved me. My father loved me. I had no brothers and sisters but I had uncles. They were all musicians, singers and dancers. I had a real party. I enjoyed myself growing up. Johnny Nash was another singer who influenced me and so did Joe Williams. I do Joe's tune "All Blues". I added about six or eight more choruses to it about different things. Now it's mine. It's always Joe's but I do it too. There aren't songs that are prohibitive to sing. So, what ever you do, you do for others to hear. Do it and roll with it. Some songs I pick are strange because nobody has ever heard them. I take them from people who write and I say Oh, I like that and then I do them. It turns out that the song may be an original. There are people out there singing like I'm singing. It's out there for everybody. This is not your stuff. It's everybody's'. That's the way I feel. There is no voice more beautiful, more enchanting, and more on the mark. I never heard anything that wasn't perfect. The intonations of his voice were like cotton with honey on it. The cotton's already soft. The honey makes it sweet, Nat King Cole. Nat King Cole was a monster! Woo, huh, huh, huh! My advice to anybody, if I were asked for advice or I was in a position where I would speak to groups of people, is to do what you want to do and see how far you can go. What ever it is you want and how you want it will depend on what style you have and how you deal with words; how you speak; how you pronounce a word to make it something other than what someone else is hearing. Nat Cole, The word l-o-v-e, it was so personal to him until he used another pronunciation. Love is one thing

but "lauve" is another thing. He just used it so perfectly. I studied Nat and the other singers like I studied everybody on the drums. I never tried to be original. I don't think I ever had an original thought in my life on a set of drums. I've had more originality on vocals than I had on drums because it's easier. There are so many talented people. When you start talking about you're the best' you ain't the best nothing. You are just one of them.

I love playing in New York and many of the festivals around the world. During the festivals, you are usually playing for people who are getting everything second hand. It's like a foreign language; you may learn to speak French but your expression is not the same as the native speakers. They get close but then there is something they don't understand. They don't understand what the blues is. They don't know! They can play the notes. Anybody can play the notes but to get that blues impetus, that blues sound, that blues feel that comes from the depths of your soul, is difficult to get. So, I never got to enjoy to the fullest extent the European festivals. The closest thing to being comfortable in another area of the world is Japan. The Japanese are so in touch with the singer. It's almost like you really are related because they get to it and they get to it very, very comfortably. The Japanese love the music. There are reasons for it that people aren't aware of. In 1942 when there was big war. The Americans did something that was totally unbelievably wrong. Destruction and chaos was everywhere (The Bombing of Hiroshima etc.). Out of that came another group of people. People that were destroyed and harmed severely. They had to survive. They survived with the American soldiers on their heels. The American soldiers brought their music when they occupied a town. Whenever you had an area that was being occupied, the occupiers would bring their culture into it. When a group of people are practically destroyed or erased from the face of the earth, those few who do survive get with the ones who were responsible for all of this. The women got with the American men. The men brought their music. The children of the unions were listening to Jazz and American music. Now, when you go to Japan you can hear some of the baddest Jazz musicians in the world! They are playing and they are playing authentically. No Jive! I'm so proud of them I don't know what to do. Quite often I use two Japanese players. One is a pianist, Akiko Suruba, a great pianist and Norico Weda, a bass player. They are just incredible. We did a concert in a festival in Atlanta and tore it up! I was just amazed by the female playing like that and looking that way. So many things make for goodness around the world. Good things come out of bad experiences.

We all need mentors in life because coming up we are too young to know all that we need to know about life. Someone has to straighten you out and set you on the right path. One of my mentors was Jo Jones. (You could see Grady's eyes begin to water as he spoke) He was like a father to me in terms of the drums. I was about thirteen and there was a place called the Durham Amory in North Carolina. They brought in all of

"Ultimate success
is not directly related to
early success, if you consider that
many successful people did
not give clear evidence
of such promise
in youth."

Robert Fritz,
The Path Of Least Resistance

James Carter

Interview by Jazz Improv Staff
Transcribed by: Dave Miele

JJ: What are some of the key lessons you've learned about human nature and business?

JC: Wow...human nature...I know the main thing I really learned was being true to one's self about the company that you keep—on record as well as off. If you have a musical vision, if you're down with the individuals in your clique—you need to stick to your guns. Somebody that's coming in from the outside isn't really going to have that focus with you, and your best interest in mind, for the most part. Up until [my album] *In Carterian Fashion*, I really didn't start thinking about other players, because I guess I wanted to be all important, in the way that I had a cohesive unit. I wanted to manifest the maturity and the longevity that we had together. We already had a sort of telepathy that was going on. I guess you could call it a raw telepathy where they knew I was going to go somewhere, I knew they were going to go somewhere—and to be able to be in support of that without saying anything. A whole lot of groups don't have that—spontaneous cohesiveness. "Do 'The Bumblebee'...Alright ... Do 'Lucille'...Alright, hit it" You know? Yelling out some key terms or whatever for what you're going to do. But other energies can be presented that can help you manifest some other stuff by bringing on other people. That came about, like I said with *In Carterian Fashion*—by having Henry Butler and Cyrus [Chestnut].

JJ: Those of us who write and play this music, needless to say, have a very emotional connection to our creations. No one but the artist can fully understand what went into getting that work completed or the intent.

JC: I totally agree. You've got to also consider

the source. People don't realize that sometimes you can get caught up in the moment or that you have a method to your madness. As far as playing a long time—its not just about "Oh, I can play a long time. I can go for hours." If I'm playing long, I'm enjoying the company that I'm keeping. In order to play on it a long time, it's got to be the right piece, the right character and all that, so that it can sustain that involvement. Not everybody—critic or listener—is going to take all that in. If you're running that musical church, if you will, which all of us are, you've just got to look at it with a sense of: if I lose one



individual, then there's going to be two other converts that come up. But, that shouldn't bring me away from what my doctrine is. You know what your doctrine is because it's basically embedded inside of you. It's just about cultivating that and letting it grow.

JJ: How do you stay balanced given the stress and distractions that surround us in contemporary life?

JC: I'm really trying to make it as simple as possible. You just finally realize that you're here for a particular purpose. If you're down with that

particular purpose, that puts ego and all that in check. You put people in your inner circle that cater to that. Hopefully people on the outside of that can see that, and use that as a template to get themselves in order.

JJ: Meeting Lester Bowie appears to have been a fortuitous meeting and connection that you made. What significant understandings did you glean from that association or what interesting discussions did you have that might have made a significant impact on your developing artistry at that point?

JC: The main jewels that I got from him were to continuously stay focused...and its always about the ears---keeping the ears open and not being afraid of what one hears and being fearful of externalizing it because of somebody else's chagrin, you know, if something's given to you, its basically your gift to share upon the world...a higher being exists and its given to you to hear in this particular way and to externalize in this particular way and that makes it all your own and there's only so much that chords and symbols and progressions are going to do...that understanding basically levels the playing field...but as far as what you take out of your life and what you can hear, that's a gift that's given to you and being able to *infuse* it in order to put your own personal stamp on it and to at least have some semblance of...I would say it's trying to separate yourself from the pack, but it's basically being yourself

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This is an excerpt from the complete interview with James Carter that is scheduled to appear this fall in Jazz Improv® Magazine, which is available by subscription and at retailers nationwide.

the great bands from New York. I would just stand there and look at the drums. During the end of one of the gigs Jo called out "hey you!" "Hey boy." I said "me?" he said "yeah you!" "Are you a drummer?" I said, "I want to be" He said, "Come up here." I walked around to the stand. He said, "Stick out your hand." So I stuck my hand out and he took two drumsticks and hit me so hard. Wham! Tears came streaming from my eyes. He said, "Close your hand. That's a little bit of the pain you're going to have when you start dealing with these drums. They will kill you. You got the strength for it?" I said, "I think so." I have one question." He said "What." I said "Will you have dinner with me at my home?" Man, from that time on we have been tight as thieves. He was innovative and also a very very funny dude! He would move his mouth and make faces while he played. He was

a whole show. I took several of my licks from him; those that I could play. He'd check me out and say, "Yeah, you almost got it." When I came to New York we were friends until he died. He was a bad dude. Most of the drums that I had heard were very noisy. Jo played them with such beauty, especially the brushes. It makes people play differently. That's what you always want. Cat's who say I don't care what they think about me. I play drums the way I like. That's garbage. You should play the drums the way people around you like. That's what keeps your gigs going. You have to do things that people enjoy. You have to look a way that people enjoy. Man, It's a whole lifetime of adjustments. That's my philosophy. We talked about old man Joe Jones. Philly Joe Jones was another monster. I loved him too. I loved Boo Heena. I learned the strength of a shuffle from him. The

importance of being able to shuffle. There is a way to do it and there is a way that it doesn't make sense because it's noisy, loud or boisterous. You put the shuffle on somebody and it will make them stand up. Man, I've seen cats. They would be playing like down like this (He leaned over to one side as if he was playing drums) and suddenly they would hear something and say "whoa" and they would drop that boy right down between their legs; because you can lay down that "bap be dum ba ba bow." (Grady mimicked the sound of drums) you know, wooo! That's the fun in it. That's enjoyment for me. That's the thing that made me love what I've been doing all these years. I'm seventy-four now. I started when I was four years old and I haven't stopped until this day.

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Ashford & Simpson's Sugar Bar



The famous R&B singing duo, Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson, are already in the songwriters Hall of Fame and their songs are notably recognized by just about everyone who has listened to music for the past two to three decades. They are also restaurateurs and the proud owners of the very successful Sugar Bar restaurant located at 254 West 72nd Street in Manhattan. They feature live Jazz on Tuesday nights and open mike on Thursdays evenings.

Despite the many challenges of opening a restaurant, including obtaining seemingly infinite numbers of city permits, cost overruns, management and staffing; Nick and Valerie have built a restaurant that captures a taste for the love of good food, and an appreciation for esthetic design and a culturally rich décor. It starts at the front door which is inlaid with forged brass and copper. The interior is exquisitely decked with hand made natural materials and fabrics. You will find masks, art and artifacts from Nigeria, Congo, Burundi, Sudan and other countries throughout the African continent gracing the walls.

Through the auspices of Chef Berthony Pierre, the menu features a delicious assortment of Afro-Caribbean classics including paella, a house specialty, which arrives at the table in its cooking pan. Diners are invited to serve themselves family-style. Fish of the day – red snapper, sea bass or parilla de mar are the most requested dishes.

Nick and Valerie were gracious to sit down with us and tell us more about the Sugar Bar. "The idea for establishing the Sugar Bar was inspired by Dr. Maya Angelou. We use to go down to North Carolina and sit around her table and talk. It was a small and intimate place and she would cook and fix food. Nick: "I thought to myself after we got back to New York, what a wonderful situation just to sit around and eat and talk and thaw out with people. We had this space at the bottom of our office building and we just had band equipment there. So, I said let me change this into an eating-place and that's how it happened." Valerie: "Initially, it started out that we were just going to have a restaurant, but then everyone would call because they knew we were involved in music, and ask, "Where's the music?" So, it was a natural progression to add in music on certain nights. Those nights increased and now there is music almost every night at the Sugar Bar." Nick: "Yes, it was just a restaurant, now it's like a club restaurant and I think it's good because I think there is a lack of that in New York; places where people can come and be entertained and have a good dinner too. The food is exceptionally good

here, we think and we're growing. We are trying to get someone to come in and video the shows on Open Mic nights for a TV series or TV special. That's one of our ideas, which we think would attract more people to the Sugar Bar. We have Jazz night on Tuesdays. We use to have poetry but that didn't work so well because they don't eat. They just like to drink coffee or tea. We couldn't make money on those nights. We have to keep the doors open so we couldn't have the poetry, but it was really nice!"

Valerie: "You can find jazz here on other nights besides Tuesday as well. Sometimes artists who sing on Open Mic nights end up getting there own night in which case jazz may be presented on an additional evening. It's all about getting exposure to artists that have potential and can develop a following. We have had many famous artists come to visit, eat, enjoy the entertainment and perform such as Patti Labelle, Stevie Wonder, Chaka Khan, Michael Douglas,



Catherine Zeta-Jones, Liza Minnelli, Freddie Jackson, Norman Connors, even Nina Simone actually sang here. They come here because they are our friends. They feel comfortable and before you know it they're up there on the stage. We don't have to ask!

Maya Angelou has cooked here and recited poetry. Roberta Flack did several nights here, on her own. She decided she wanted to do something for the Sugar Bar. It was a most unique experience for her fans because they got a chance to see her up close and personal. She brought her full band and we put a grand piano on stage and you had a once in a lifetime experi-

ence hearing and seeing Roberta Flack. Chris Parker, a great drummer, came by he was just sitting in the audience and decided to go up to play." Nick: "One of the great things about coming here is that the customers are always in for a surprise because they never know who is going to show up that night. You can't tell, and if you missed it the word gets out. It's a good thing. I love when the guests come in without warning or being announced. We get a lot of people from out of town." Valerie: "People from the Broadway play *The Color Purple* were frequenting our restaurant and they were looking for someone to play one of the characters, Shug. There was a young lady who sang here that Nick recommended for the job. Well, she got it! So she went from the Sugar Bar to Broadway. We are getting so many customers from the play *The Color Purple* as a result. It's been an inspiration to us because some people came here to have a good time. Those are some of the things that happen here. Some of the singers pick up gigs, Like Ron Grant. He sang while Patti Labelle was here. The next thing you know he was singing on stage with Patti Labelle. You just never know what's going to happen.

The cuisine here is eclectic. It's a mixture of things Mediterranean, Caribbean, and if Nick has a fancy he'll go in and speak to the Chef and the next thing you know Nick's favorite will be coming out next.

It's a different eating experience but everyone loves the food when they come. When we go to different states we often tell people about the Sugar Bar. It's a good reason why we have so many out of town customers. New Yorkers should expect to call for reservations before they come to avoid waiting on line. Nick has created a living room atmosphere where you feel like you're really at home. All of the African Art is authentic and hand picked you just feel that it's a warm earth tone environment. There are different levels that add to the ambiance of the restaurant. Even in the garden room you can see what's going on through the wide screen and the same in the upstairs room, "The Cat lounge" as well.

There is something for everyone. What I love is that we have young children, grandmothers, mothers, the young generation, and the 20 year olds. There is always a nice vibe. Michael Douglas brought his son who is a DJ downtown. He felt like he wanted to show his son he was happening. "You know like this is a place you don't know about;" and his son was really impressed. That's kind of nice." For reservations and information call 212-579-0222 or visit www.sugarbarnyc.com.

