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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Boston-based saxophonist helps keep jazz alive

Kevin T. Cox

Walter Beasley will have a very busy weekend — with four shows at Scullers Jazz Club and an in-store appearance at the Circuit City store in Dorchester’s South Bay Center — but he won’t have to travel far. The contemporary jazz icon has made the Boston area his home for over twenty years. Better known nationally than locally, the singer, saxophonist, educator and entrepreneur is one of Boston’s greatest musical treasures.

As a child growing up in southern California, Beasley was surrounded by musical influences — gospel, jazz, R&B, Latin and more. Those sounds moved him, and inspired him to move others through his music. One instrument in particular, the saxophone, called to him through the music of Grover Washington Jr., and Beasley answered that call with such talent and enthusiasm that by the time he became a teenager, he was already playing in various bands. At the same time, Beasley was also turning heads with his vocals, singing — in Spanish — the romantic Latin songs that have continued to influence his sound. As his musicianship evolved, Beasley was also developing the character and work ethic that he views as keys to his success.

“When I was younger,” he recalls, “my father had me working in the fields. I learned how to be hardworking by working in the watermelon fields and cantaloupe fields. You learn the value of working as a team, [and] you learn the value of saving your money.”

Earnest and multi-talented, Beasley was well prepared when he entered Boston’s prestigious Berklee College of Music. Still, Beasley would have to adapt to a Northeast climate and culture that was far removed from his southern California roots.



Contemporary jazz saxophonist and singer Walter Beasley has been teaching at the Berklee College of Music for over 20 years. (Photo courtesy of Affable Records)

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“Man, I remember the first time I flew over this city. When we were landing I saw these big apartment complexes where people were living on top of each other and I thought, ‘What the hell have I gotten myself into?’” he recalled. “Then the weather got cold, and I’m still trying to wear double-knit pants and it’s 20 or 30 degrees outside!”

As visitors to the region have often noted, residents of the Northeast — particularly those in New England — can appear to be at least as cold as the weather. “I would say that people are much more closed in the Northeast, more so than in California,” Beasley said.

Nevertheless, Beasley adapted well to his new home. At Berklee, he honed his skills, studying alongside the likes of Branford Marsalis, Donald Harrison and Rachelle Ferrell. Outside of the classroom, Beasley began to sprout roots in the community and forge long-lasting friendships.

“Boston was the best place for me because I was able to utilize everything I had learned in California, and I learned how to think here. I put it all together here,” said Beasley. “I can’t say enough about the Boston area and the people who have supported me all these years.”

After graduating from Berklee in 1984, Beasley took what was supposed to be a short-term teaching position at the distinguished institution. More than 20 years later, what started as a short-term position has blossomed into a highly regarded teaching career that’s still going strong.

As a member of Berklee’s Association of Faculty of African Descent (AFAD), Beasley has worked to increase the number of African American students and faculty at the college.

“I’m proud that I’m part of AFAD,” said Beasley. “We put forward the initiative to challenge Berklee to actually say that this institution was founded on the music of African Americans, and we changed the mission statement to reflect that. We now have a mission statement and we have to live up to it.”

Beasley is, of course, best known for his stellar recording career, which began with his self-titled debut in 1987. For the past 20 years, Beasley has

been a fixture on Billboard's contemporary jazz chart. Considered the heir to Grover Washington Jr.'s throne, Beasley is among the top five best-selling African American saxophonists in the world since 1998, and stands alone as the best-selling full-time college professor and recording artist.

Fellow Berklee alumnus Branford Marsalis describes Beasley as "an anomaly; a successful performing musician who possesses the rare skill of understanding the musical process beyond the intuitive."

Beasley's soulful R&B/jazz sound has been categorized as "smooth jazz." While that label may be an oversimplification of his work, he has no problem with it. Never a jazz purist, Beasley has always emphasized quality of music over strict categorization.

"For me, jazz didn't die with [John] Coltrane or Miles [Davis]. The music just kept moving forward," said Beasley. "We didn't just get to smooth jazz yesterday. It evolved into this. People can get locked up in super-intellectual debates about what jazz is or what jazz isn't, but it's like Duke [Ellington] said: 'Either you got good music or bad music.' At the end of the day, that's what counts."

Beasley's current release, "Ready for Love," peaked at number 2 on Billboard's contemporary jazz chart. "It's my best work," he says "I worked on it for a year-and-a-half." The album features several original Beasley compositions and a cover of the R&B classic "Be Thankful For What You've Got."

"That song speaks to the fact that you have to acknowledge that you are a great individual and establish that as a foundation," he explained. "It doesn't matter about the money or who you are — you gotta be thankful for what you have. "

"Willa Mae's Place" is a tune dedicated to the late Willa Mae Brothers of Dorchester, whom Beasley described as "a great role model for me, like a second mother or grandmother." In honoring her, the jazz great means to honor his longtime adopted home.

"My tribute to her is a tribute to Boston and the people who have supported me over the last 20

years,” he said. “This record, I think, speaks to the man that I have become largely because of the support that people in Boston have given me.”

In addition to recording, touring and instructing, Beasley is a successful entrepreneur. He is the founder and CEO of Affable Publishing, which produces instructional books and DVDs for musicians, and owner of a record label, Affable Records.

“I’m very thankful to be able to say that I own my own records, and I own my publishing company,” Beasley said. “It’s a very good feeling, and with that comes a lot of responsibility — and that is to teach others who look like me to do the same.”

It is this sense of responsibility that moves Beasley to speak out on the obstacles and opportunities facing black America today.

“Our people are in the same position as we were 20, 30, 40, 50 years ago,” he said. “But there are a few of us who are becoming quite rich and quite powerful ... I think comfortability, for our people, is the kiss of death. In order to grow, there’s going to be discomfort. You’re going to have to go that extra mile, to be dedicated, to be committed. And these are all things that our ancestors taught us how to do, but it just seems as though it is no longer being preached.”

Beasley sees firsthand that lack of commitment in some of the students he sees in his role as an educator.

“As a college professor, I see some of the young brothers and sisters coming up and some of them are very, very talented, but there’s no focus, the commitment is not there, the work ethic is not there,” he said. “Not only with black people, with young people in general — but it affects us even more so. We were always told as young people that we had to be twice as good as our white counterparts in order to succeed. That’s still the case today, but young people aren’t being told that.”

Beasley feels that his generation of African Americans has largely failed to honestly engage, inspire and empower the younger generations.

“In order to really start developing healthy black young minds and souls, we have to be honest with ourselves and we have to be honest with these young folks so they can realize their full potential,” he said. “That’s what I’m trying to do with some stuff I do at Berklee and outreach programs in other cities.”

Beasley endorses what he calls the “five P principle” — “Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance” — as keys to success. He offers the following advice to young music students:

“If you are going to study rap music, you can’t just study 50 Cent. You’ve got to study Public Enemy and Grandmaster Flash. If you want to study smooth jazz, you can’t just study Walter Beasley. You’ve got to study Grover Washington Jr., Hank Crawford and so on. And you have to study the culture from which those artists came. You have to understand what it felt like to be a product of those times. If you do that, and you use technology to your advantage, you’ll be successful. The reason I’m able to be successful is because of those who came before me, because I studied what they did — on the bandstand and off of the bandstand.”

With black radio now all but extinct in Boston after the demise of WILD-FM last year, Beasley has considered leaving his adopted home for a city with a more substantial black community, such as Washington, D.C, Baltimore, Atlanta or Detroit. But for now, he’s holding fast to the roots he put down all those years ago.

“Either I can go, or I can make my voice heard, step up my game and be more involved in this community, and right now I’ve chosen to do the latter,” Beasley said. “It’s a great career and I owe most of it to the Boston area because this is where I became a man, and this is the community that supported me when I needed them most.”

Beasley will sign copies of his new CD, “Ready for Love,” and perform live tomorrow at 1 p.m. at Circuit City, South Bay Center, 8 Allstate Road, Dorchester. For more information, call 617-541-4120. He also performs Friday and Saturday nights at Scullers Jazz Club at the DoubleTree Guest Suites Boston, 400 Soldiers Road, Boston. Shows start at 8 and 10:30 p.m. Tickets for the show are \$30; tickets for both dinner and the show are \$70. For tickets and

information, call 617-562-4111 or visit
www.scullersjazz.com.

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