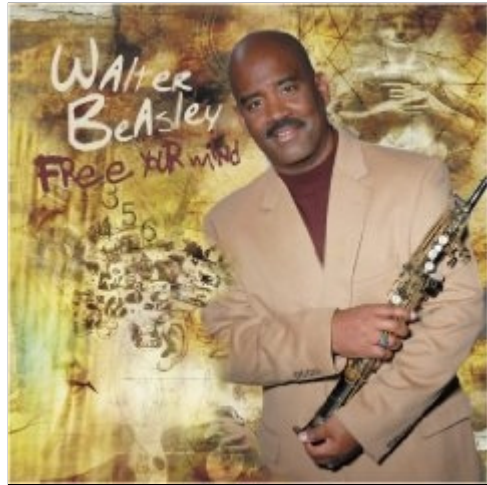


Free Your Mind

A Conversation with Walter Beasley

Artist Interview by: [Kevin Cox](#)

In the sea of chaos and uncertainty that is modern life, one of the most crucial struggles we wage is the struggle to achieve, and hold onto, peace of mind. *Free Your Mind* is both sage advice and the title of Boston-based Saxophonist/vocalist/educator Walter Beasley's new CD. "All I wanted to do", explains Beasley, "was accurately reflect the times and how I felt about them".



JazzReview: Your last CD, *Ready For Love*, was widely considered an artistic and commercial success. What have you been up to since?

Walter Beasley: I guess after *Ready For Love* I put everything down for a while - I worked on my website, did a couple of new educational DVDs. I really felt that as I entered this new stage of my life. I wanted to make sure that if someone wanted to take what I've done and expand upon it, that there would be a roadmap - and that's what I wanted WalterBeasley.com to be. I added more education products, podcasts, and so on. That took about a year to do. Then I started the writing process for the new record, but I stopped because I really wasn't motivated. And then my Aunt died, and she's like my second mother. When that happened it really forced me to think about what I really wanted to do. For the first time in my life I couldn't...well, usually you throw yourself into you work, but it just didn't happen. It's almost as if I was telling myself that music is no longer where I can find refuge when there's a whole bunch of stuff going on that needs to be dealt with. So, I put everything in the car and I went to Florida. James Lloyd sent me a song that just moved me so much and inspired me. I said to myself "This really frees my mind up. It's time for me to get back to work!". I had been living this musician's fantasy for so long that I forgot how to be me. So, I just wrote a bunch of stuff that just made me relax. What I learned from the last couple of years is that it's about balance, it's about making sure that the next generation is prepared to do something different but at the same time carry on the tradition that I learned from Grover Washington, that Grover learned from Hank Crawford, and on and on. That's what my priority is now.

JazzReview: At the time, you felt very strongly that *Ready for Love* was your best effort ever. Would you say that *Free Your Mind* takes it up a notch - how would you compare the two?

Walter Beasley: I think *Free Your Mind* is a different kind of record. When you listen to "Dukezillia"... I couldn't have put a song that was a Brazilian vibe, that was dedicated to George Duke on *Ready for Love*. That song -it's a very complicated tune and *Ready for Love* was not the kind of album that "Dukezillia" would have been good for. Same thing with "Message for Mark" - a song about my brother who died - or "Miss Minnie", those are beautiful songs. As a writer, I think I took it up a notch, and it reflected where I was in my life. And the economy collapsed! Everything is happening so fast, you really don't want to be reminded of everything happening so fast. I made sure that this record said things a little differently. I can listen to *Free Your Mind* and I'm ready to take on life's challenges.

JazzReview: What immediately strikes me about *Free You Mind* is that it is more complex musically than any of your previous releases.

Walter Beasley: There are songs on *Free Your Mind* that I couldn't have put on any record previous to this. It's interesting that because the economy and the music industry is going through what it's going through everything is a bit more open, so I was able to create something that reflected my life. I mean, "Dukezillia" is not easy, "Message to Mark" is not easy, they are complex. These things I probably would not have done had the (old) industry not collapsed. I think in the midst of chaos you can really come up with something special, and I think that's what I did with this one. Had it not been for the times, this album could never have been done the way I did it. When you listen to some of the things that are going on harmonically, it's like - whoa, this is different. But it's actually not different. I've been teaching it for the past 25-30 years. But because things are freer now, I was able to incorporate that into *Free Your Mind*.

JazzReview: It seems that you shared a lot more of the responsibilities on this record - *Pieces of a Dream* keyboardist James Lloyd, for example, is featured heavily.

Walter Beasley: Because of the tragedies in my life, I couldn't be the record producer, the arranger, the vocalist, and the saxophonist - I didn't have the time, and I didn't have the will. The only thing I could do was write, and play the saxophone. I knew that others were in a better situation. Like Little John Roberts, who plays with Janet Jackson, Jill Scott, etc. Phil Davis has been with me for years. I know how capable they are. I know James Lloyd, I've played with him and been a fan of his for years. It was such a joy to be able to say "You know what fellas, I don't have it on that end this time, Do you have my back?" And to know that all three of them would say yes, we got you. And to know that all I had to do was play saxophone, sing, and write. I may do this for the rest of my life! It's a relief to know that I can take a step back and let others create, and let others enhance my creativity. It's a joy behind words. And to have the discipline to leave the ego behind, I think that's age. I would never have been about to do that in my twenties and thirties.

JazzReview: Tell me about Barack's Groove.

Walter Beasley: Phil Davis wrote the song. I had endorsed Barack Obama on my website early on, and then I saw him on television, dancing with Ellen Degeneres, and Phil Davis had sent me this kind-of East African groove. I said, this song and this man belong together. I called up Phil and said "How about calling this Barack's Groove". So, that's how it came about. At that point, I was already proud of what he had achieved - win or lose, this by far was that best thing that had happened to me politically. And to know that even if he didn't win you could tell a black child, bi-racial child, Asian child or whatever, that he or she could be president of the united states, and mean it, was much more than I could have ever hoped for in my lifetime.

JazzReview: So what are you doing these days?

Walter Beasley: Touring is down a little bit this year because the economy is so bad. But, a lot of the income that I may lose in the performing area I'm making up in other areas. I've started teaching saxophone on-line through Skype. It's a wonderful thing. I'm able to do my own curriculum so that students can have the benefits of learning the way I learned.

JazzReview: Your on-line sessions are for the more advanced students?

Walter Beasley: No, not at all. The majority of my students are weekend warriors - older students who've loved the saxophone all their lives and want to get back into to it. I have advanced players and not so advanced players. I take pride in teaching people who aren't as advanced. They're the better students. When you don't have as many options, you listen better to the person who's trying to get you better.

JazzReview: Besides your own music, what are you listening to now?

Walter Beasley: On my play list I've got Nas, some Baroque music, Pat Metheny... I'm

going back and relearning some older solos - Dexter Gordon, Art Blakely and the Jazz Messengers, Hank Crawford, Johnny Hodges - just trying to get a different approach to things I learned in my twenties. I'm amazed at some of the stuff I'm hearing now.

JazzReview: Sounds like you are in a good place right now.

Walter Beasley: You know, people are complaining about the music industry, but this is a great time to be a musician, a great time to be a business person, and a perfect time to be both. That's what I teach my students. One other thing I'd really like to let people know is that happiness is something you really have to work at. It's that decision where you say "I'm going to smile so that I can feel better" that starts you moving on your way. I know it's simple, but I really had to deconstruct myself and put myself together again.

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