

Randy Weston, D.M.



"I am truly blessed to have heard and spent so much time with the masters of our music during my rich cultural life of music. I am grateful to be a part of a great spiritual legacy. Thanks to the ancestors and the great musicians who have inspired me. Thank you very much."

--- Randy Weston

Pianist, composer, bandleader and lecturer Randy Weston (born April 6, 1926) has spent most of his career combining the rich music of the African continent with the African-American tradition of jazz, mixing rhythms and melodies into a hybrid musical composition.

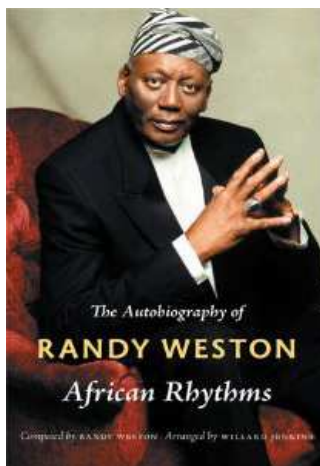
Weston received his earliest education from private teachers in a household that nurtured his budding musicianship. Growing up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in the central portion of the New York City borough of Brooklyn, Weston was influenced by such peers as saxophonist Cecil Payne and trumpeter Ray Copeland as well as the steady influx of great jazz musicians who frequented Brooklyn clubs and jam sessions on a regular basis. Such musicians as Thelonious Monk (1917-1982) and Duke Ellington (1899-1974) would have a lasting influence on Weston's music, both in terms of his piano playing and composition.

After a 1945 stint in the U.S. Army, Weston began playing piano with such rhythm-and-blues bands as Bull Moose Jackson (1919-1989) and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson (1917-1988). At the Music Inn educational retreat in Lenox, Massachusetts, in 1954, he took work as a cook during the summer, while playing the piano at night. The head of Riverside Records, Orrin Keepnews, heard him and signed Weston to do a record of Cole Porter standards.

Weston's recording sessions frequently included contributions from his Brooklyn buddies Copeland, Payne, and bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik (1927-1993). It was at this early juncture that he also began his long and fruitful musical partnership with trombonist-arranger Melba Liston (1926-1999), a relationship that would continue until her death in 1999, forming some of Weston's best recordings.

Weston's interest in the Africa was sparked at an early age by his father's interest in the philosophy and work of Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), and thus he lectured and performed on the continent in the early 1960s. He toured 14 African nations with his ensemble in 1967 on a U.S. State Department tour, eventually settling in Rabat, Morocco. He later moved to Tangier, opening the African Rhythms Club in 1969. It was in Morocco that Weston first forged unique collaborations with Berber and Gnawan musicians, infusing his jazz with African music and rhythms.

Since returning to the U.S. in 1972, he has lived in Brooklyn, traveling extensively overseas with bands that generally include trombonist Benny Powell (1930-2010) and longtime musical director, saxophonist Talib Kibwe (aka T.K. Blue). In recent years, a number of Weston's U.S. concert appearances have been true events, including 1998 and 1999 Brooklyn and Kennedy Center collaborations with the Master Musicians of Gnawa, and a triumphant 1998 recreation of his masterwork suite "Uhuru Africa" in Brooklyn. Many of Weston's compositions, such as "Hi Fly" and "Berkshire Blues," have become jazz standards.



In 2010, Weston's autobiography, *African Rhythms: The Autobiography of Randy Weston* was published by Duke University Press. Hence, the book (told by him to the music journalist Willard Jenkins) reports that Weston is one of the world's most influential jazz musicians (he has travelled to more than 40 countries), a remarkable storyteller and that via his childhood when his parents and other members of their generation imbued him with pride in his African heritage, his music has taken him around the world wherein he has performed in eighteen African countries, in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, in the Canterbury Cathedral, and at the grand opening of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina: The New Library of Alexandria with Africa at the center of his music and spirituality.

And moreover, the book is filled with accounts of the people he has met and befriended, and with whom he has worked as he describes his unique partnerships with Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Melba Liston, and the jazz scholar Marshall Stearns (1908-1966), as well as his friendships and collaborations with Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993), Coleman Hawkins (1904-1969), Thelonious Monk (1917-1982), Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967), Max Roach (1924-2007), Charlie Parker (1920-1955), Miles Davis (1926-1991), the novelist Paul Bowles (1910-1999), percussionist Cándido de Guerra Camero, Kofi Ghanaba (1923-2008), the Gnawa Master Musicians of Morocco, and many others.

Weston is a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master and a 2011 Guggenheim Fellow. On May 20, 2012 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Colby College (Waterville, Maine), and in 2006 he received the same degree from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. His (selected) discography includes: *Uhuru Africa/Highlife*, Roulette, 1960-63; *Blues to Africa*, Arista/Freedom, 1974; *The Spirit of Our Ancestors*, Verve, 1991; *Zep Tepi*, Random Chance, 2005; and *The Storyteller*, Motéma Music, 2009. Weston continues to perform, record, and lecture on the history of jazz.

References:

National Endowment for the Arts

http://www.nea.gov/honors/jazz/jmCMS/master.php?id=2001_03&type=bio

Randy Weston

<http://www.randyweston.info/>

Black History Special: Jazz Legend Randy Weston on His Life and Celebration of "African Rhythms" February 20, 2012.

http://www.democracynow.org/2012/2/20/black_history_special_jazz_legend_randy#transcript

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