

# Barbados Jazz Festival 2007 - January 8-14

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By Bill King

From my eyes to the distant horizon a mountainous blanket of clouds some as tall as a one hundred story building rise imperious above a coruscating sea below. I've seen this picture many times before but this particular moment it reads almost surreal as if the last details of an unfinished painting are being considered.

The closer we descend towards Barbados I spot the contrasting colors ranging from aquamarine to cobalt blue profiling the circumference of the lush tropical island. This is where the surreal and the real intersect. I've made the journey twelve times and never tire of this perspective.

From one year to next the second week of January is reserved for the Barbados Jazz Festival. It's like dropping in on old friends - those you care the most about and staying just long enough to remember why you made the trip. Don't get me wrong - I love the music but through the years it's the people, the grand hospitality and splendid surroundings that make the week so unique.

Landing at Grantley Field is no longer a chore. As with everything in Barbados, the commercial landscape is being upgraded and polished. Everything is new. New floors, walls, shops, entrance - even immigration has been streamlined and modernized. This is the new face of Barbados whose past economy tied to sugar cane is now exploding under construction and tourism.

I asked a taxi driver what drives the new economy. His response - Education. Millions of dollars are poured into school systems, health services - the basics for living a life with dignity. Even the shanties that survive seem more faade than real. There's an atmosphere of busy - people focused on the work day. How this plays out a few decades from now will depend on how impending environmental issues are resolved.

There are over a hundred and ten thousand automobiles inhabiting a hundred and sixty-six square miles - housing a population of two hundred and sixty-four thousand. Do the math - Gridlock is a fact of life.

The jazz, the jazz, the jazz. Yes, this is the Caribbean where the word jazz can mean many things mostly light years from the origins of the word. If you scan the neighboring jazz festivals you may get totally confused. For example the Air Jamaica Jazz Festival which is showcasing such jazz luminaries as Michael Bolton and Kenny Rodgers. Have I missed something here? Wasn't it Michael Bolton who committed that immortal transgression on the rhythm and blues classic, 'Try A Little Tenderness' a sledge hammer vocal-pounding. Maybe I missed the jazz overhaul Kenny Rogers gave to the spunky, 'Ruby Don't Take Your Love To Town.' Help me here!

To his credit, Barbados Jazz Festival organizer Gilbert Rowe is earnest about being

inclusive. By that I mean including jazz for what it really is.

Opening night at the Sunbury Plantation in St. Phillip was a delight with pianist and Houston native Robert Glasper leading the way. This would be the most tranquil phase of the entire festival.

Glasper and trio rolled through several gems culled from his Blue Note debut *Canvas*. Songs like Enoch's Meditation, North Portland and Just in Case showed the full range of Glasper's compositional and improvisational skills. Glasper stayed locked to the keyboard - no stage antics or showbiz patter - just great music. Nearby, bassist Derrek Hodge and drummer Kendrick Scott filled in collectively. This was sweet motion and concentrated interplay from three of the best.

Glasper joined trumpeter Terrence Blanchard in the main bout of the evening. He was called upon to fill in for Blanchard's absent pianist. This he did admirably with only a thirty minute rehearsal.

Blanchard began by lifting his horn skyward and aiming at the overhanging green and violet lit tree limbs - unleashing a chain of blistering lines that would eventually find themselves etched in the pitch black countryside miles from the bandstand. This was a jazz man on a mission. The songs were long - evolving vehicles for each player to comment from. The most recognizable was Wandering Wonder which also brought tenor saxophonist Bryce Winsen in play.

Blanchard charmed and thanked Barbadians for their moral support during and after Hurricane Katrina. He also apologized for dressing in denim the result of accidentally packing his wife's pants instead of his customary stage wear. A truly class act!

Day two has become a favourite of islanders. This is the night you come dressed to celebrate your own. On this occasion there was much to appreciate.

A half hour before the opening act it looked as though there'd be a surplus of empty seats at Heritage Park but by the time pan master David 'Ziggy' Walcott took stage with his well-tuned band the place was filled to capacity.

Walcott is somewhat a legend in these parts. He studied the fine art at the University of the West Indies - St. Augustine Campus while playing stints with the Renegades and All Stars of Trinidad. Walcott sounded off on a broad selection of choice pan standards one scripted by the maestro himself - David Rudder's - Hammer another grandmaster Lord Kitchner's - Pan in A Minor.

Walcott is a remarkable musician who plays with great sensitivity, virtuoso technique and full command of the challenging instrument. He also held sway over the electric band - one which could have plowed their own direction by insisting the band explore a broad range of dynamics. It was also tantalizing hearing two adept supporting pan musicians play counter lines and harmonies concurrent with the lead instrument. This was high art.

There were rumblings about the positioning of Walcott as opening act for newcomer - gospel singer turned pop artist - Hal Linton. Linton won four coveted awards at the recent Barbados Music Awards.

Throughout the energized set Linton strolled from one end of the stage to the other carrying a broad smile and singing material from his debut *Spirit, Life and Love*. The highlight - Al Green's *Let's Stay Together* with a Bajan rhythmic twist brought the crowd to their feet.

There is no doubt Linton has all of the tools to be a major entertainer but will need to find a focus. While most of North America is lapping up the latest gangster rapper or glitzy pop queens Linton falls in a zone not quite defined. If the original material were to define the man my guess Linton might want to take a more provocative stand in the lyric content and greater thought to the melodic development. The age of the sweet soul crooner passed eons ago.

My best take on Linton is he has a shining career ahead as a solo gospel singer. This is the place where a young man with spiritual connections and tremendous stage presence will eventually find his audience. The world pop scene is not for the squeamish or the caring.

Now let's get to the bizarre. Night three began as a frontline showcase for local singing sensation Marisa Lindsay. Opening for a Grammy Award winner especially one as celebrated as Macy Grey should have been the evening's story.

Lindsay took full command of the setting with the same confident stride seen in Hal Linton the night before only this stage was five of six times grander in dimension to Heritage Park. This time it was the Garfield Sobers Sports Complex, a major athletic facility dressed up as a concert hall. In the past Ray Charles, Luther Vandross, Patti Labelle, Chalka Kahn, Gladys Knight, Lou Rawls, Dionne Warwick, Lionel Ritchie held court. This is the place where on most occasions past greats are seen and remembered.

On this night it was Marisa Lindsay who made the most positive contribution. Lindsay with her Dinah Washington like inflections and speaking voice much akin to actress Jennifer Tilly charmed the audience. Lindsay barely spoke the first few sentences when suddenly you knew we were in good company.

Throughout the set Lindsay told antidotes and sang tunes from her recent release *Submit to Love*. She loves her jazz. *Night and Day*, *Lover Man* and *What A Difference A Day Makes* we're all given a contemporary makeover.

Now for Macy Grey. This was probably the most interesting act of the festival in that Grey's music was clever, comical, soulful to the nines and arresting. Grey shuffled through her classics - *On How Life Is*, *The Trouble With Being Myself*, *The Id* with raw purpose.

Early on I heard the word ass spoken and wondered how far Grey was willing to go knowing full well this is one large protestant majority. The answer came just as I segued to a nearby hallway to decompress from the acute volume. I missed the offending words. I'm taking the press count as fact since it's been verified. Evidently Grey spat sixteen offending Mother F's while introducing the popular hit - *I Try*.

It took awhile for the tempest to gather but by the time the show had ended there was a mad ruckus brewing backstage. Show producer Gilbert Rowe was summoned from his home by a local constabulary intent on cuffing Grey. Rowe entered the conference room and expressed his extreme embarrassment. He also stated that if he had been on the

premises he would have not hesitated hauling Grey off the stage.

The normal chit and chat press conference was supplanted with a condemnation ceremony then redemption opportunity. Grey accepted the consequences.

If I was to call this period awkward and unnerving that would be understating the conflicting energy in the room. At one point in Rowe's lecture he said -"This country stands for propriety, decency and adherence to the law. This community prides itself on being a Christian society and we do not take it lightly. I am pleased the artiste has decided to make an apology not only to myself but to Barbados as a whole."

"My intention was not to dishonor Barbados or this event' - said Grey. "I've always wanted to come here so it was cherry on the cake, and the last thing I wanted was to tarnish it. My road manager told me a week ago but I didn't know it was against the law. - My apologies. It's a beautiful country and I want to continue having a good time, not in jail."

The following days both talk radio and letters to the editors columns admonished Grey for the sour language and inaction by the police but one gentleman commented the night after the concert saying people were being hypocritical and many are guilty of using the same language in everyday conversation.

People do come dressed for the occasion many spending over two hundred dollars for a new outfit and a couple hundred on tickets expecting the evening as a whole to be on the same class level.

During the press conference, Grey seemed caught off guard more than willing to let Rowe go the distance. At times she appeared much younger than her age like a teenager caught smoking in the girl's washroom or that Lily Tomlin character Edith Ann squirming in an oversized chair. I wondered what would have happened if that was Eartha Kitt in her seat instead. My money would be on Kitt - TKO thirty seconds into round one.

Kudos to Macy Grey's backup singers/ dancers. Most artists would never allow that level of talent and beauty on the same stage at the same time for fear of being upstaged. Grey, secure in her own skin not only let the young women dance the lights out she also gave both featured singing positions. Both were highly animated and proved to be exceptional vocalists.

Night four we found ourselves in a penthouse suite overlooking the exquisite Crane Resort. This is a place undergoing dramatic renovation. Here's a bit of history from a recent promotion:

'Perched dramatically on the cliffs of Barbados' pristine south-east coast, the historic Crane Resort and Residences, established since 1887, is the island's oldest operating hotel. Transformed into a world-class luxury residential resort, The Crane features ultra-spacious, fully appointed ocean-view one & two bedroom residential suites and three bedroom Penthouses, many with their own private plunge-pool. Facilities include the acclaimed Zen Restaurant serving classic Thai and Japanese cuisine in an authentic setting complete with a traditional Tatami Room & Sushi Bar plus the consistently popular L'Azure Restaurant, both overlooking spectacular Crane Beach, named "one of the top ten beaches in the world" by Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.'

This was the first occasion The Crane hosted the jazz festival. This night it was an engaging performance by violinist Karen Briggs that illuminated the posh surroundings. The massive swirl of pools and gardens all lit in subtle tones shined in the foreground as Briggs and company played near the farthest edge of the property. From above it was something to marvel at.

Briggs gave a heart-wrenching interpretation on Minnie Riperton's 'Loving You'. She also tackled the gospel anthem Amazing Grace with understatement and reverence.

How does one express disdain to multiple Grammy Award winner Anita Baker for keeping you waiting a full hour before entering the arena? Well, in this case unleash the Rapture.

Hand clapping and defeated attempts at spreading the wave kept folks occupied until Anita Baker's band were situated behind instruments.

The moment Baker crossed the stage with arms wide open and raised high all had been forgiven.

Baker is an icon one who comes to it justifiably. Much like the greats who've played the complex before you can never take your eyes off her - Baker's a prime A entertainer. She reduces the space between stage and audience to a matter of inches and at times seems as if she'd be at home in your living room taking requests between conversation. Baker thrilled the audience with favourites - No One In The World, Just Because, Giving You The Best, Been So Long, and encored with Fairytale.

Perhaps the best show was back stage for the press.

Baker arrived wearing her fun face. It was a loose at times hilarious exchange with the international press. One over-ripe scribe insisted on getting details on the hour-long delay which Baker blamed on her dress which she said would not cooperate and the fact she's getting older, recently turning forty-nine and a woman. How could you argue with that? She also sang a couple lines accapella from the song Angel for a journalist who had requested it during the show. The moment was pure magic.

Another hilarious moment came when a gate-crasher asked to be photographed with Baker. For most of the press exchange Baker ignored the man eventually called him near. The moment was priceless. Rather than standing a comfortable distance from his beloved idol the man moves closer and starts kissing her then places his hands around her waist. Baker could have decked the offender but with the same grace exhibited during her hour and ten minute set she ushered him out of harms way with a few choice words and swift hand action.

Day six we were off to Farley Hill National Park. Revelers start arriving around 11 a.m. and kept coming until the final act somewhere near 6 p.m. In the early years the temperature and humidity made the occasion a steamy affair. These days with climate reversal - the park was as moderate as a lovely late June day in downtown Toronto.

On this day it was the battle of the bands - from the young Cuban upstarts led by trumpet virtuoso Yasek Manzano ending with Cuban Arturo Sandoval and his lightning quick fingers.

Manzano for his part is already in the major leagues. The former Julliard Conservatory

student is quickly becoming one of the young titans on the horizon. I had the good fortune to catch him with the Alexandro Vargas Group in Old Havana May 2006. I was impressed then at his lyrical soloing. Unlike some of his counterparts who play high and fast - Manzano is a deliberate, thoughtful player connected more to Clifford Brown and Dizzy Gillespie than the floor shows.

On this occasion he spared with a splendid cast of like-minded young players. Organizer Gilbert Rowe finds plenty to do for young Cubans each season planning seminars at schools and having them front the after-hours jam sessions which have thankfully improved. Long gone are the endless calypso jams.

Manzano began with a vibrant take on Gillespie's Night in Tunisia then segued into a experimental version of Besame Mucho. I thought about the process and the countless times Manzano must have played the tune for tourists over the years and how it probably evolved organically as an escape vehicle.

How can one properly evaluate what was to follow? Without warning the volume rose to chest crushing - ear splitting - brain damaging levels. Three bands to go?

I wanted to truly enjoy this day down front of the bandstand but for health concerns I hid behind the ancient faade which served as a back drop and deciphered what I could from the sonic bounce.

Arturo Tappin arrived decked in white wearing a stripped wide brim hat. Tappin has the credentials - even a long stint with diva Roberta Flack to validate his inclusion. He's also an accomplished instrumentalist.

Tappin builds his show around originals and current popular hits even giving new life to Bob Marley's Redemption Song. This is smooth jazz Caribbean style - lots of pleasant melodic hooks and rhythmic backgrounds. Tappin planned his show like a revue with guest singer Rhea making an appearance. In all it was a pleasing affair.

Next up - the bombardier himself - bassist Stanley Clarke.

I knew trouble was brewing as Clarke toyed with the sound balance between what I estimated four large bass cabinets. Each time he plucked a string a piercing arrow struck my chest with the force of a megaton bomb. I could foresee the future and it wasn't pretty. True to my premonition Clarke struck with a vengeance. This was old fashion take-no-prisoners jazz fusion with gobs of lightening fast motifs and plenty moments of virtuosic grandstanding.

Clarke stabbed at the strings - pulled, pounced and squeezed every possible note within the framework of the song -the highlight being crowd favorite - School Days.

Day six - Sunday - the final episode began in sharp contrast to the previous day. A most interesting choice was the inclusion of Oakland, California resident Goapelle Mohlabane - she being the daughter of exiled South African political activist Douglas Mohlabane.

Rain saturated everything within its glorious reach leaving the grounds of Farley Hill a wretched mess. Every time I took a step forward my sandals became heavily impacted with mud and sticks. I kept imagining I was sporting the same feet as Frodo Baggin's sidekick

Samwise Gangee - the guy with the weird branches extending from the soles of his most extreme appendage.

Goapelle's brief set was a delight somewhere between the airy wistfulness of Sade while focused on issues that burden all humanity. It's a mix of rhythm and blues, hip-hop, a bit of jazz and electronica that bring it all to life. At the core, it's still her stage demeanor and aloof charm that keeps one fixated on the show.

Next up, the Brazen Bunch. This is a popular collective out of the United Kingdom with roots in contemporary rhythm and blues. It depends on which side of the Atlantic you reside how that might be interpreted.

Former lead singer with Icoignitio - Imaani Saleem - born Melanie Crosdabin in Nottingham; pianist Eska Mtungwazi, poet Zena Edwards form the core of the band.

Throughout the funk-ed-up set each did their own thing. From radical poetry to gospel like testifying it was a joyous encounter for all. From there the afternoon shifted under the weight of replacement act - saxophonist Najee.

Najee was summoned to action after Will Downing phoned in sick. Najee is running out of islands. This act has played continuously the past fifteen years making the man truckloads of cash but at this juncture of his career - the well's gone dry. The music has become to predictable - complacent - downright boring. The world is throwing so many new rhythmic possibilities and tonal colors about you'd just wish the man would tune in.

As for American Idol winner several season's past - Rubin Studdard. I point back to my original contention. Why karaoke? - Why Michael Bolton? Why Kenny Rodgers? Enough said!

While in Barbados we stayed once again at the splendid Bougainvillea Beach Resorts which recently purchased the spectacular neighboring property Sandy Acres and is giving it a makeover. I can't express my gratitude enough and sincere thanks for putting this pencil/lens jockey up in such fine luxury accommodations. To Gail Stewart and Cheryl Carter my friends from Barbados Tourism Authority whose efforts make all of this possible year after year - you're the best.

Lookout for the Beaches Jazz Festival 2007 - some of the brightest Bajan talent I wrote about earlier could be coming our way.

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