

The interview

Facetime, 9:00 AM (New York) – 04/25/2021.

Kenny Barron: Hello?

Daniele Mele: Hello Mr. Barron?

K: Yes... how are you?

D: I'm fine, how are you?

K: I'm okay.

D: Okay, nice to meet you.

K: My pleasure.

D: Here I am. So, I'm very excited right now and I thank you for having me this conversation with you.

K: Oh, it's my pleasure.

D: You know I was talking with my dad before, and I was saying to him that I think there is a big difference between Jazz and Popular music. If I want to talk with a big musician such as you I have some possibility to talk with a "big name". If I would talk with a pop idol I would have more difficulties, I think.

K: I think so, yeah. *(ride)*

D: Yeah... Jazz is more popular than Popular music!

K: Yeah...

D: Okay, so you are fine. I would like to ask you about the vaccination, I know you are vaccinated: is all right with that?

K: Oh yeah, I've had two Moderna. Two vaccination, so... I'm okay.

D: Fine. These are crazy times!

K: Yeah, they are.

D: Okay. I will discuss with you some points that interested me while writing the degree thesis about you. I know you have played here in Italy at Umbria Jazz with several musicians. I'd like to know what was your first time here in Italy, and why.

K: First time in Italy was... waoh... 1963? '63 or '64, I was with Dizzy Gillespie.

D: Oh waoh!



K: Yes, we were to Milan.

D: Was it one of the stops of the tour you made all around the world with him?

K: Yeah, we played there in Piazza Duomo and that was incredibly beautiful, the cathedral. So that was the first time.

D: Do you like Italy?

K: I love it. The folk, the people... you can never find a bad meal in Italy. That's very difficult anyway!

D: That's true. What about your relationship with Italian music? For instance, I'm from Naples, South of Italy. I grew up listening to "O Sole Mio" or "Tu Sì 'Na Cosa Grande". Do you know these songs?

K: Oh yes, I've heard them many times. I've never known the composers, but I've heard them many times.

D: Ok! Do you have some particular anecdote about Italy, or musicians that you know here?

K: Ah... I think obviously one of my favourite person is Dado. We played together in duo, several times we had a tour playing the music of Monk, we were four pianists. Actually I think we have something coming next year, I think in Budapest. I got playing with him many times, and I love him.

D: Yeah.

K: First time I met Dado was at a workshop in a city near Genova, called Nervi.

D: Was he attending a workshop about you?

K: No no, he was actually my translator!

D: Oh nice! (*ridono*)

K: So we got very friendly each other. And I heard him playing for the first time. Actually, there was a jam session, every night at a club there. I got to hear him play and I was fascinated, he's an incredible musician. And bass and drums!

D: Oh... I didn't know that!

K: Oh yeah, I would hire him! To play bass, and I would hire him to play drums.

D: Nice...

K: And I did a recording with Stefano, Stefano Di Battista, some years ago. And the bass player, I can't remember the name now...

D: Maybe Rosciglione?

K: Who?

D: Rosciglione. Dario, or Giorgio Rosciglione?

K: Oh no, no! I know them, father and son.

D: Yeah.

K: It was a younger one. Anyway, good players all of them.

D: Ok. Well, I'd like to talk with you about three albums that I love. The first one is "Canta Brasil". I love that album! You know, I dance with girlfriend Salsa and Bachata...

K: Ah-ah, waoh!

D: Yeah, I used to dance before Covid of course, now that the places are closed. But I love it, so when I listened to those kind of rhythms I start to dance and to move. I really enjoyed that album, and am I correct if I tell you that all started with THE man, Dizzy Gillespie?

K: Oh, it kind of did, we didn't play that many Brazilian pieces but that was my introduction to Brazilian music. We were used to playing Desafinado, Samba De Uma Nota So... but what really got me into Brazilian music was hearing "Brasil '65", you know... in 1965! I was listening to the radio in San Francisco, and their current record was that album and it really knocked me out. There were wonderful guitars, then Wanda De Sah, and the pianist, he was the leader, Sergio Mendes. That was the group that really turned me on, into Brazilian music. From then I worked with Stan Getz, who played a lot of that music. And then just doing some research and listening to older Brazilian music, those of the Samba school. Then I met Nilson Matta, Duduka da Fonseca and Romero Lubambo, and we started to play and play together. They taught me a lot about different rhythms, and where they came from... this rhythm comes from North of Brazil, this other one comes from South of Brazil. So I learned by working with them. And that's how we found the band, which is Canta Brasil.

D: Yeah, nice... you know, I really wanted to know more about Gillespie. How was he like outside the musical world? I began studying Jazz some time ago, and he is one of the "big name" that you think you have to study, and that you have to take things from.

K: Outside of music?

D: Yeah.

K: He was great, a very kind person actually, also very funny... outside the music world!

D: Oh, was it not during the music?

K: Oh yeah he was funny! But a lot of people thought it was just a show, but he was also funny when he was not on the stage. That's the kind of person: he was funny, very kind and a very respectful person.

D: Nice. So you had the world tour between '62 and '66.

K: Yeah.

D: What about the tour stops? You told me Milan, in '63.

K: Yeah that was in Italy. But also played in other places: Copenhagen, we were in Sweden, Warsaw in Poland, which was still communist at that time.

D: And what about outside of Europe?

K: We didn't played outside of Europe. We only did one European tour, and that the first time I went to Europe. But that was a great beginning for me!

D: Yeah, I can imagine it! (*ridono*) Let's talk about the second album, that's called "Two As One", the album you made with Buster Williams.

K: Oh Buster yeah!

D: And that's a particular one for italian people, because it was made in Perugia at Teatro Morlacchi.

K: Yeah!

D: That's great! I can remember "All Of You", and "Someday My Prince Will Come", and the ostinato Buster does... 40 seconds maybe of that F, and then it all opens up when he plays the D bass and the frequencies that enrich the music. That's wonderful!

K: (*ride*)

D: So, what about Buster Williams? How he's like?

K: Oh I love playing Buster Williams. I've just actually watched a video about him... I don't know if you've got Amazon Prime in Italy.

D: We have it.

K: It's called "Bass To Infinity".

D: Oh! I will check it.

K: Yeah. It's all about his life, there are some interviews with Herbie Hancock, Lenny White... all played together with Buster. It's about literally an-hour-long, and it's very nice. You know he's a Buddhist, so it talks about his buddhist's pratice and many other things. We've known each other since 1958, when we were both teenagers in Philadelphia. I've known him for a very long time, we've worked together a lot... he's one of my favourite bass players all the way around.

D: And I read he played with... well is there someone he hadn't played with? He played with everyone!

K: Yeah, everyone. And singers love him, he worked with Nancy Wilson for long time. Sarah Vaughan for a long time. This video talks about the first time he went on the road, right out of high school with Gene Ammons and



Sonny Stitt, and he had to get his mother's permission... it's a great video, check it out!

D: I will! You know, the beginning of the degree thesis contains a message about Philadelphia, and about the thing that all good musicians are from there. That's a kind of magic! (*ridono*)

K: Well not all but many are! I think one of the reasons, first of all, it is very close to New York, only 2 hour drive. So Philadelphia was one of the main stops for travelling musicians coming from New York, and I remember seeing Kenny Dorham and many other people, who just drove down to make a gig in

Philly. And you can come to Philly for a night, and drive back when the gig is over. Philly had two main clubs where they featured world-class musicians, one was called Pep's and the other was called Showboat. I used to see 'Trane at Showboat, Yusef Lateef, Miles played there, so many people. Philly was an employment place, and I think for that reason there were lots of young players who developed, including myself, because we had all around the music.

D: Mm.

K: And Philly also had a lot of places for young players to work, there are many clubs I worked at in Philly. And that was a great thing, to have these places to play in. That helped me in my development, and there were other young players that I associate with, who are still around! There were Sonny Fortune, well he is gone now... we grew up together, and Buster you know. So Philly was a great place, great.

D: Ok. This musician is from Philly too, it's about the third album and this is my favourite one. I'm talking about People Time.

K: Oh, Stan! Yeah.

D: Yeah, this is the reason why I began to study your music and your way of playing.

K: Mm.

D: I love that album, and I read that you had the live recording in Copenhagen in March of 1991.

K: Yeah.

D: Is it true that he considered you as his other musical half-part?

K: Er, I don't know... he said that! (*ride*) So... and I believe he meant that when he said it, yeah! Musically we were... is it the word emphatical? We kind of approached the music the same way, melody was important.

D: Yeah! You know Kenny it seems to me that when he stops playing you continue playing the saxophone, but using the piano, and the same for him.

K: Ah! (*ride*)

D: You know what I mean? That's incredible! It really seems to me that you are both connected.

K: Yeah, I think so. We both had a love for lyricism, and that was important. Stan could play a ballad and make you cry, with his sound and his ideas and creativity. That was a fun gig, especially the duo thing, he was... well I'm sure you know the story.

D: I do.

K: He was ill at the time, when we did those duo recordings. He actually had sort of a bleeding cancer, so he was in a lot of pain. And we were supposed to record for three nights, we only did two nights, he couldn't finish the last night. We had one more gig after that, in Paris, and he couldn't play a lot. So he would play the melody and I would take most of the solos, and that was the last time I saw him.

D: I'm so sorry about that.

K: Yeah. But as a matter of fact it was March and I called him about a month later, to see how he was doing. He said me he was OK and that he was playing the next tour, and then in June... that's when he passed away. We lost a good one.

D: Yeah. To me there are two great saxophonists in Jazz history, and they are Stan Getz and Paul Desmond.

K: Really?

D: Yes, I really like them. Of course there is Charlie Parker, and those kind of saxophonists that are amazing and outside any sort of classification. But I really like Paul and Stan for the way they play.

K: Well is it you like the... sound?

D: Yeah.

K: I can appreciate it. Paul had a very soft and willowy, tender sound. And one of the first Jazz records I heard was Dave Brubeck with Paul Desmond, it was called "Jazz Goes To College".

D: Yeah I can remember it. Is it maybe... sixties?

K: Late fifties actually, 'cause I was still living in Philly. That was one of my favourite records, you know.

D: Nice! So, just one last thing about Stan Getz... in which occasion did you start collaborating with him, at which age? Do you ever regret not meeting him before.

K: Well I always regret not meeting people before, yeah. But I'm glad when I did! I got a call to work with him, actually to take Chick Corea's place.

D: Oh.

K: He had a band with Chick and Stanley Clarke and Tony Williams. He called me and asked me about taking his place, so that was the very first time that I worked with Stan. It was amazing, we played all Chick Corea's music. I think it was called the the "Captain Marvel Band" or something. It was a short tour, we played mostly a few gigs in South Carolina and Baltimore. When we left Stan said to me: "You're an accustomed musician", and for me that was a big compliment. And I didn't hear from him for a while, and then a few months later a got a call from him to take the position at Stanford University.

D: Yeah.

K: Artist-in-residence. He called to come up there and play some concerts with him. And since there we started to go to Europe during the summer because I was teaching at Rutgers University and he was teaching at Stanford, so I couldn't try with him that much during the school year. But during the summer we did all the big festivals in Europe. He had a good band, for there were Victor Lewis and Rufus Reid. We did a couple of



recordings at the Montmartre with the quartet, and did a couple of recordings with him. But always it was great music, great writing. We did one kind of electronic record called Apasionado, we did it in California. I enjoyed it, was different for me! There were strings and all kinds of electronic instruments. A great experience that I'd never done before.

D: Ok. So you told about that, I'd like to talk about teaching. You were a piano teacher at Rutger University, and then at Julliard too, the old Manhattan School.

K: Right.

D: Are you still teaching? Or did you drop it?

K: No, I've retired.

D: Why, if I may ask?

K: Well I'm getting old! (*ride*) At a certain point you feel like you need to learn something, I needed to learn something else. I needed to listen to other people play, and get some instruction in a way. The students ahead were so good, I mean really good... what did I have to give them? In Manhattan I had Gerald Clayton, Aaron Parks, he was one of my students, and several others... in Julliard I had Jonathan Batiste, at Rutgers I had Terence Blanchard, Harry Allen. And they all played great piano by the way!

D: How was your typical lecture? What did you do during the lesson?

K: Basically we played together, I always had two pianos in my teaching studio. We would play together 'cause that would allow me to hear what they can actually do or can't do playing. I mean, they were on the point where I needed to tell them "this is a C chord", they didn't need that from me. They already know how to play. So we were maybe into these finesse and refinement, and ideas about touch, lines, things like that.

D: Ok. So was your lesson like a live performance, but guided?

K: Yes, kind of that! We would play and then stop, and say "Ok... here we are playing a ballad, you don't have to play so hard, you don't need to play so many notes in this ballad... leave some space, silence is a part of music too". Things like that. And I think they took it too hard.

D: So... do you have any suggestion to become a good teacher? Is there a special ingredient?

K: No, I don't think so. I mean it varies, people have different ways of teaching. My way of teaching was to listen to the players and to hear what they could do, and to challenge them. We would take a song and play it for thirty minutes, and then we would exchange back and forth, to train you

know. And then we would try to challenge each other, and that's good when students try to challenge you too! (*ridono*) I learned a lot as well.

D: Yeah.

K: It's not like "I'm your teacher and you do what I say", it's not that kind of thing at that level. It's more an exchange of ideas, you know. I learn from them, they learn from me.

D: Nice, thank you. Let's talk about composition. You have composed a lot: I love Until Then and Sunshower, in particular. How much important do you feel it is to write original pieces, that have got your own sign?

K: I think it's important. I think you should write as much as you can. What I look for in writing, what I try to achieve in composition is... I like simplicity. I don't write things that are in 11/8, 9... I don't write stuff in odd times signatures. I don't hear that way! Some musicians do, they do it very comfortably and I love listening to it. But for me my own approach is very simple melody, harmonies that maybe sometimes are deceiving... or maybe not sometimes! Simplicity is what works for me.

D: Yeah. I was thinking... do you reckon this is a fundamental passage? A passage that a musician has to do in order to feel complete? Or do you think he can skip this passage?

K: You mean "skip writing"?

D: Yes.

K: Well not all musicians are composers, some of them don't write. But, as someone said, improvisation is composition but it's just not written down.

D: Indeed.

K: Jazz musician is composing all the time. When you start to write it down, then that's a composition! (*ridono*) But a lot of musicians just are not into writing, and I stand it. I think it's another part of you that you should explore.

D: Ok. Hey, listen to this. I once attended a Billy Childs' masterclass...

K: Ah!

D: He's a great composer, in my opinion.

K: Yes he is!

D: And he said something amazing for me. He said: "The secret of composing is to create something surprising yet inevitable".

K: Yeah, ok.

D: That it sounds to me like you have to create music that has some links with the past, so that you are listening to that music and you know where it is

going, but that then it has something surprising that changes the direction, yeah?

K: Right, right, right.

D: Do you agree with it?

K: I do agree. And I've listened to quite of Billy's music, he's a brilliant composer.

D: Yeah, nice one. So: do you remember a good suggestion someone gave you in the recent or in the far past, or a particular event that changed you compose or play?

K: Er... yeah! Somebody once told me an idea which I'd actually tried: try to play your solo all within a space of a perfect fifth. All of your improvised lines. Obviously you can't do that for chorus after chorus after chorus, but just give it a shot. How much can you play just in that short space of a perfect fifth?

D: I didn't get it Mr. Barron.

K: Ok, so on the piano, a perfect fifth. Right?

D: Yeah.

K: C to G. And you're playing a song, whatever it is, try to play everything inside of that perfect fifth, chromatically.

D: Ok...

K: And see how it works. Just something you can try... you might be surprised. Because whatever the note you come up with will work against whatever chord you play. It has to be figured out, but it can work. That's a suggestion somebody gave me and actually tried. It's something to have to keep doing.

D: Ok, now... that's the last part. Beyond the music, I'm curious about the typical Kenny Barron's day. Are there any particular things you like to do during your free time, if you're not playing?

K: Well I like to read a lot. I like to read novels...

D: What kind of novels?

K: I like a certain author named James Patterson, a lot of crime novels and things like that.

D: Yeah! Do you like Zafon? Carlos Ruiz Zafon?

K: Who?

D: Carlos Ruiz Zafon?

K: Oh, I don't know that.

D: No?? That's a great one! What about Dan Brown?

K: ...James Brown??... Dan Brown??

D: Dan! Er... "The Da Vinci Code"?

K: Oh yeah yeah I read that! (*ridono di gran gusto*) I read that. I actually saw the movie too!

D: Yeah... anyway I interrupted you, I'm sorry.

K: No, that's ok. I was saying during Covid that's not much else to do, because otherwise I'd go out anywhere, listening to music or anything like that. So that's what I do, I read and also trying to cook!

D: What do you cook?

K: Schnitzel... steak! All the things like that.

D: Do you like pizza?

K: I love pizza. And the best pizza I've ever had in my life was in Naples!

D: Waoh! And do you remember the place?

K: I don't remember the place, but it was so thin... with garlic...

D: Maybe Sorbillo?

K: I don't remember it, because someone took me there. And I felt in love with it, that was the best pizza I've had in my life. And I also love to eat! (*ridono*) Which is bad!

D: It's not bad! You know this year made me reckon that there are other things apart from music. And if you use those things to feed your music appetite, you will be more relaxed while playing and generally better.

K: I think so. You have to be a well-rounded-person, which means taking in all of life, not just music. There are some people who are obsessed with music, that's all they do, 24/7. Listen to music and practice music, they write music 24/7. I would like to be one of those people but I'm not, you know. There are other things that capture my attention sometimes, whether it be politics or social things that are going on in the world. You know there is the trial of the guy in Minneapolis that captured my attention.

D: Yeah, mine too.

K: There are other things that happen. But they can also inform your music, in some way.

D: Ok. So what are your plans for the future? Are there new albums on the way, new projects?

K: Not right at the moment. You know there's a saxophonist named Greg Abate. He did a recording of... about fifteen of my compositions, with the trio. He plays alto, but he also overdubbed saxophone so he kind of wrote a saxophone section on some of the pieces. It was quite interesting!

D: Ok!

K: So I think the only thing I want to do next is a solo, and then a duo maybe duo with drums and percussion and... a cello!

D: Nice!

K: Yeah something like that. And it's cheaper to produce because I don't have to pay myself you know. *(ride)*

D: Ok... are you coming to Italy?

K: There are some things in the book, I don't know whether they will be cancelled or not at this point. But I think Perugia and Pescara are in the book?

D: I hope so!

K: I hope so too. And there are some other things... there was one in a town called... Merano? Not Milano, but Merano.

D: Yeah, in the North of Italy.

K: Yeah, I'm not sure that's gonna happen. But I think by July or August the things will ease up quite a bit, I hope so.

D: Yeah, and I'll be here waiting for you!

K: Ok! *(ridono)*

D: Vaccinated of course, hoping to hug you and to meet in the real life.

K: Ok! Thank you so much.

D: If you agree I will update you about the proceeding of the thesis.

K: Yeah, ok.

D: I'm very thankful, thank you very much.

K: Oh my pleasure!

D: We'll see soon.

K: Ok, bye bye!

D: Thank you, goodbye!

