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## *Kenny Burrell: Bebop, Ballads, Blues and Beyond*

Born 90 years ago, he is one of the finest and most-esteemed living jazz guitarists and an ardent advocate of Duke Ellington's music.

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By John Edward Hasse

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Guitarist Kenny Burrell performs at the Nice Jazz Festival in July 1978

PHOTO: REDFERN/GETTY IMAGES

B.B. King and Duke Ellington reportedly called him their favorite guitar player. Though not a household name, Kenny Burrell—who turned 90 on July 31—is one of the most respected and plentifully recorded American guitarists. He has made more than 100 jazz albums as leader, performed as a sideman on thousands of recordings, and served as an inspiring college educator and Ellington advocate.

Mr. Burrell grew up in a musical family in Detroit, a vital incubator of such future jazz notables as vibraphonist Milt Jackson, bassist Paul Chambers, and the Jones brothers—trumpeter Thad, pianist Hank and drummer Elvin.

While he was still a child, records by Ellington and Count Basie caught Mr. Burrell's ear. By the time he was 12 he wanted to play saxophone, but his mother was working two jobs, his father was dead, and there was no money for a sax. Mr. Burrell managed to scrounge up \$10 to instead buy a cheap acoustic guitar from a pawnshop. The first music he played was the blues. He soaked it up: "In the neighborhood I grew up in there was all kinds of blues playing," he said in a Smithsonian oral history, "and a few clubs around and just people on the street."

Three guitarists made a profound impression on him: Benny Goodman's guitar man Charlie Christian for presaging the single-note melodic lines of bebop; Nat King Cole's sideman Oscar Moore for his chords; and Django Reinhardt, a French Roma, for the idea that "you don't have to sound like anybody else."

At Wayne University in his hometown of Detroit, where he majored in music theory and composition and studied classical guitar, Mr. Burrell did a slow burn when encountering faculty with anti-jazz attitudes. He made up his mind: If he ever had an opportunity as an educator, he'd "do something about it." By the time he left Detroit, he'd played with visiting artists Dizzy Gillespie and Billie Holiday. Performing with these and gifted local jazz musicians, he recalled, was "like a university without walls."

Moving to New York in 1956, he became a studio sideman much in demand for his adaptability, impeccable musicianship and music-reading skills. By his own count, he cut more than 6,000 recordings of pop, rock and soul music with such artists as Tony Bennett, James Brown and Aretha Franklin. In jazz, he recorded with Stan Getz and Sonny Rollins and co-led an album with John Coltrane. Mr. Burrell helped popularize a trio format of guitar, bass and drums.

A model of feeling and understated elegance, Mr. Burrell's distinctive style features a mellow tone, clean singable lines and harmonic sophistication. He influenced any number of guitarists. At 6-foot-2, he cut an imposing but gentle and unflappable figure.

He teamed with the earthy Hammond organist Jimmy Smith to make more than a dozen albums of "soul jazz." Mr. Burrell said in a recent phone interview that he and Smith were "simpatico: He could read my mind and I could read his musically. It happened with no one else but him." You can hear their interplay on the title track of their 1963 album "Blue Bash!" with its late-night vibe.

Mr. Burrell's versatility is the theme of "Guitar Forms" (1965), a collaboration with esteemed arranger Gil Evans. One of Mr. Burrell's most affecting discs, its highlights include the exotic, languid "Lotus Land"; a fresh take on the folksong "Greensleeves"; and a lyrical reading of the ballad "Last Night When We Were Young."

In the title track from "Blues—The Common Ground" (1968), Mr. Burrell deftly renews the age-old blues chord progression and, through four successive choruses, shows how to build an illustrious solo. The deliciously slow blues "Soulful Brothers" showcases Mr. Burrell out front with pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter and drummer Grady Tate locking in a tight groove.

In 1972 Mr. Burrell moved to Los Angeles, and in 1978 at the University of California, Los Angeles, introduced one of the first regular college courses on Ellington, which he called "Ellingtonia." In our interview, Mr. Burrell told me that he admired Ellington for his vast musical importance and wanted him to "become a role model for musicians coming up, particularly African-American musicians." Demand for Mr. Burrell's course outstripped the lecture hall and students were regularly turned away. In 1996, Mr. Burrell became UCLA's first Director of Jazz Studies, impressing students with his accessibility and wisdom.

By the time he stopped teaching in 2016, more than two thousand students had learned about Ellington from him. The idea of an entire course dedicated to Ellington's music spread to such institutions as Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Indiana University.

In the 1975 albums "Ellington Is Forever, Volumes 1 and 2," Mr. Burrell pays homage not by seizing center stage, but rather by spotlighting one master musician after another—Joe Henderson, Thad Jones, Jimmy Smith, et al.

Teachers never know how long their impact will last. For Kenny Burrell—a much-admired

performer, prolific recording artist, and sought-after educator—his influence seems likely to endure for a mighty long time.

*—Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. His books include “Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington” (Da Capo) and “Discover Jazz” (Pearson).*

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