



Gerald Wilson and Jim Merod



Jim Merod and Riverside Records Producer Orrin Keepnews

BluePort Jazz, A Labor of Love

Jim Merod's Long and Fabled Recording History

Jeff Wilson

Most of us have attended a concert so amazing that afterwards we would have killed for a recording of it, but Jim Merod doesn't have that problem. Since 1965 Merod has recorded hundreds of jazz concerts, and eventually his passion to document what would otherwise be lost forever launched a record label. Since the early 1990s, BluePort Jazz has released 24 albums, all of which can be purchased at blueportjazz.net and eastwindimport.com. The label's roster includes names well-known to jazz lovers—including Gene Bertoncini, Buster Williams, Joe Wilder, Kenny Barron, Marshal Royal, Jackie Ryan, Roy McCurdy, John Hicks, Mike Garson, and Joe LaBarbera—along with some West Coast heavyweights well deserving of a wider audience.

Recently I spoke by phone with Merod about his passion for recording, and that conversation helped clarify why BluePort Jazz is such an impressive small label. As committed to jazz as a person can be, Merod has been booking musicians at venues on both coasts for decades. An audiophile who never stops experimenting, learning, and refining, Merod has recorded all across the United States and Hawaii plus Vienna, Salzburg, Venice, Barcelona, and Budapest. Somehow he manages to do all this while teaching advanced courses in music history, humanities, and literature and directing the highly praised Jazz Monsters program at Soka University in California. Merod, who also writes for *Positive Feedback*, co-authored Benny Golson's upcoming autobiography, *Whisper Not*. Recently in New York to give a tribute for his friend of thirty years, trumpeter Joe Wilder, he also recorded Arturo O'Farrill's orchestra at Birdland. The following week he mounted a tribute concert at Soka for his longtime pal, Gerald Wilson, who had just passed at 96.

Because his father was rehearsing a Dixieland quartet in the living room before he was born, Merod insists that his affinity for music began *ab ovo*. Growing up, he tagged along to his dad's gigs each week at Dudley's Tavern in St. Louis. During high school, he spent most Saturday nights at a buddy's house stocked with a tube stereo and hundreds of classic jazz LPs.

Later, while attending Princeton University, Merod hung out in New York jazz clubs on weekends, a habit that was initiated before classes had even started. "I visited the Village Vanguard my first day in New York," he said. "I wandered down Seventh Avenue from Port Authority. It was easy to spot the Vanguard with its big canopy out over the sidewalk. It was early September 1960 and I was 18. Here I was outside the world's greatest jazz club and the door was open. I walked down the stairs and went inside.

"I'm sitting in the empty club at two o'clock that Saturday afternoon," Merod continued, "and some guy's sweeping the floor as I'm looking at all the pictures: Monk, Dexter Gordon, Dizzy Gillespie... After a while someone came out of the kitchen and boomed, 'Who the hell are you?'"

That person was Max Gordon, owner of the already legendary club. Jim told him this was his first trip to New York and he wanted to visit the jazz shrine before classes started at Princeton.

"What are you drinking?" Gordon responded.

Music Feature

For the next hour and a half Gordon grilled Merod on his jazz knowledge. Apparently he passed muster because that evening Max let him in for free to hear Miles Davis with J. J. Johnson (not bad for a first night in the Big Apple). Between sets Gordon introduced him to Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, who asked him to sit at their front table. "For the next four years any time Max Roach was there, I sat with him," Merod said. "He introduced me to just about everyone in jazz. By the time I headed west to study at Stanford, I'd met a lot of heavyweights." Many became friends and contacts.

Merod's first success as a "producer" happened the spring semester of his first year at Princeton. He borrowed two thousand dollars from Dean Lippincott and hired Count Basie's orchestra for the freshman prom—and what ensued was a once-ever event.

"Thirty years later Marshall Royal, who coordinated the band for decades, told me that was the drunkest those guys ever got on the bandstand," Merod said. "They were booked from nine to one-fifteen or so, but they played until quarter to three. Only twenty or thirty kids were left, but the band had been delivered so many bottles of scotch that they just kept playing.

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"Right before they quit, rhythm guitarist Freddie Green stood up and took a solo," Merod recalled. "Basie looked like he was going to have a heart attack. Drummer Sonny Payne seemed ready to fall off the top riser. I went backstage to find out what it all meant and Basie told me that Freddie had been in the band twenty-five years and *never* taken a solo. Not once.

"I'll give him more scotch from now on," Basie concluded.

Merod began recording live jazz in 1965, but what began as a hobby became an obsession after he was asked to record major jazz musicians every week. While teaching at Brandeis in the 1980s, Merod encouraged musician friends to come from New York to play in Boston. Many wanted their gigs documented.

"I guess my work really took off when I

started recording at Ryle's and the 1365 Club in Inman Square and, later, at the Reggatabar near Harvard," Merod noted. "I harassed guys like Tommy Flanagan and Stan Getz to visit. Flanagan would stay at my house near Concord. On Christmas Eve of 1985, Terry Gibbs, Buddy de Franco, and I walked for hours in bone-chilling weather so they could buy presents to take home."

At first Merod used inexpensive gear, including the surprisingly effective Sony Walkman Pro, but eventually he was able to incorporate some more hi-tech toys. "In 1990 I was a Fellow in the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California," Merod said. "They funded my Panasonic SV255 digital machine, and that's when my obsession with recording gained intensity. I invented a few tricks with mic placement and shielding sonic pick up. I'm surprised that perverse ignorance and curiosity could re-invent techniques with a long history. I've never studied, but I've tried to improve by striving for the best possible recorded sound staging. Surprisingly, truly great recordings can be made with completely average mics."

With the equipment he now uses and his "constant search for sonic intimacy," Merod finds himself working at the cutting edge of technology. "Using Horus quad-DSD equipment, my partner Joe Kubala and I recorded Delfeayo Marsalis' octet performing Ellington's Shakespeare suite, *Such Sweet Thunder*, two nights in a row. The vivacity and dynamics of those recordings are so real, with holographic immediacy, that I believe, on the right playback system, quad-DSD recordings virtually outflank acoustic truth in good concert halls."

The fruit of Merod's efforts is apparent on his BluePort Jazz releases. Of the CDs I sampled, three featured memorable piano trios. Recorded live at the Adobe House in Mountain View, California, *Sunshower* captures the lyrical side of John Hicks (accompanied by Roy McCurdy on drums and Bob Magnusson on bass), with lovely renditions of "My Foolish Heart," "Laura," "My Funny Valentine," and a solo Strayhorn medley. As Merod states quite accurately in his liner notes, "The essential voice of *Sunshower* is romance."

Pianist Mike Garson is well known for his work with David Bowie, Nine Inch Nails, and Smashing Pumpkins. His "jazz-only" live trio date recorded in Piper's Opera Hall in Virginia City, Nevada, *Way Out West* is a blend of originals, jazz standards, and Broadway show tunes that includes a tribute to pianist Bill Evans. The two-CD set contains alternate takes of Miles Davis' "Nardis" (trio and solo) and Chick Corea's hip "Tones for Joan's Bones." A varied set list and alluring hall ambience distinguish this release.

Another live date, *65 Roses*, features Buster Williams' Trio with Kenny Barron on piano and Lenny White on drums. "For almost twenty years, Steve McCormack has saved difficult recordings and enhanced others with his magic mastering skills," Merod said of this date. "Buster's session was probably the most challenging we've dealt with because most of my equipment was stolen the night before the gig." It's a good thing this one got preserved. Just as "In Walked Bud" is a highlight on Barron's recent Impulse date with Dave Holland, another Monk composition, "We See" stands out here. Elsewhere the trio performs two Barron originals and a seductive version of "Surrey with a Fringe on Top." Barron's performance of his "Song for Abdullah" and Williams' bass improvisation on Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* are gorgeous solo performances.

BluePort Jazz's discography also includes less recognized but impressive West Coast players. Trumpeter Carl Saunders has worked with the big bands of Bill Holman, Bob Florence, and Gerald Wilson. The interweaving horn lines on *Live in San Francisco*, a sextet session recorded in Union Square, demonstrate that Saunders has a strong arranger's touch. On *If And When The Stars...* Noel Jewkes has a big, husky tenor sax sound that recalls such earlier masters as Ben Webster and Dexter Gordon. On standards like "Laura," "Lover," and "Body and Soul," it's one thing to emulate the "old sound" but another to play so convincingly that a blindfold test could throw a listener off by half a century. Branford Marsalis raves about "melody players." Noel Jewkes is one of those—and the same could be said of many fine players who have recorded for the BluePort Jazz label. **tas**