

DAVE HOLLAND

Biography
2009-2010



Amid endless choices, the sound of a **Dave Holland** bass line compels attention. A master of tone and rhythm, the bassist, composer, and bandleader is now in his fifth decade as a performer and his music possesses a rich and kaleidoscopic history. One of Holland's mentors, the affably sage-like saxophonist **Sam Rivers**, gave him a tip once. "Sam said, 'Don't leave anything out—play all of it,' " Holland once told a radio interviewer. "That's become almost a mantra for me over the years," he says, "as I've tried to find a way to build a vehicle which lets me utilize the full spectrum which includes the tradition, playing the blues and improvising freely. I love all that music, and there's been a desire to reconcile all those areas, to make them relevant, hopefully, in a contemporary context, as one music."

Holland is not the only accomplished bassist in music, an instrument rich in authoritative figures like **Charles Mingus** and **Scott LaFaro**. But he's the only Dave Holland, and the vivid personal imprint he brings to the music performs stamps it with a sound that transcends any arbitrary descriptions of genre or format. He is a seminal figure in post-1960s jazz, but has never allowed his work to be limited by tradition.

This path has led him from the frontiers of free improvisation to his modern ensembles that fully embody Rivers' philosophy of "playing all of it."

Born in 1946, the Wolverhampton, England, native was a steady figure on the London jazz scene when **Miles Davis** saw him at the fabled Soho jazz club Ronnie Scott's in 1968, playing in a combo that opened for the **Bill Evans Trio**. "Miles heard something in his sound and his ideas," recalled **Jack DeJohnette**, who was Evans's drummer on the date. A month later, Holland was on the bandstand with Davis at Count Basie's Harlem nightclub. He then joined the rhythm section on *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, and the revolutionary *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* sessions. It was a heady two years, but Holland was quickly developing his own ideas about music.

He recalls that one of his earliest and hardest lessons was how to make his own space in Davis' music, which at the time was electronically evolving. "When I first joined Miles' band, he didn't say much to me. I now know that to be one of his great gifts to artists: to encourage us to not play like the guys who came before us, but to explore our own creative solutions. At the time I remember reading a quote from the Sufi tradition that said, 'Plant your banner firmly in the desert sand.' That resonated with me. I knew I had to figure out what I could bring to the table to represent how I heard and felt the music."

Eager to pursue his own radical new sounds, Holland did what many of his peers would not have contemplated. He quit Davis' band, giving up the arena gigs at vast venues like Madison Square Garden to commit to the creation of his own music. And then he got even busier. The 1970s found Holland prolific. Solo, and in collaboration, he became a dominant voice in the new music. Along with fellow Miles alum **Chick Corea**, he formed the shortlived supergroup Circle, and then joined Rivers for the epochal *Conference of the Birds*. The 1972 album, one of

Holland's first for the ECM label, was a quartet session that also featured multi-reedist **Anthony Braxton** and drummer **Barry Altschul** (both of Circle). Inspired by the birds that frequented the yard of Holland's London home, and a 12th century Persian epic written by Farid ud-Din Attar, the album became a classic: outward-thinking music that made the avant-garde swinging and coherent, suffused in feeling yet attentive to form. Holland also explored the essence of his instrument in the duo record with **Barre Phillips**, *Music for Two Basses* (1971) and the remarkable solo album *Emerald Tears* (1977).

Interestingly enough, Holland's solo albums – which also include the cello-driven *Life Cycle* (1983) and *One's All* (a 1993 release on the German Intuition label) – brought him back full circle to his earliest fascination with the bass and strings. "I loved the richness of the sound and the instrument's expressiveness," he says, recalling his exposure as teenager to albums featuring **Ray Brown** and **Leroy Vinnegar**. "But what really knocked me out – and is still the key to playing this music – is the communicative quality of those players. The idea of the communion of playing struck me deeply. How they complemented each other during solos and how they interacted. This was so far ahead of anything I had heard up to that point. I saw a much wider horizon ahead to reach for. The emotion of jazz moved me. It knocked me off my feet"

DeJohnette marvels at his musicianship in this setting: "Dave is one of a few bassists who can get an audience on their feet during a solo. He learned from Miles to have a point of view in his playing." Singling out Bach's sonatas, Holland says that he's carrying on a stringed instrument tradition: "On my solo recordings and in my solo concerts, I try to find a variety of ways to play the bass so the music isn't boring and repetitive. There are different ways of pacing, and, of course, you can turn on a dime when you're playing by yourself."

It was Holland's strengths as a collaborator that marked many of his most notable efforts of the decade. His ongoing association with Rivers, Braxton and trumpeter **Kenny Wheeler** saw Holland's presence on a slew of important sessions, including a pair of improvisatory duets with Rivers and multiple credits on Braxton's Arista recordings, such as the splendid *New York* (Fall 1974). Joining forces with DeJohnette again and guitarist **John Abercrombie**, Holland joined the collective Gateway trio from 1975-77 recording a pair of albums for ECM. (The trio recorded twice again in the 1990s and continues to play the occasional concert).

Ever versatile, Holland also recorded with folk and rock musicians. As the only acoustic bassist living in Woodstock, NY, at the time, the Englishman was in demand. **Michael Cuscuna**, who produced several Braxton sessions with Holland on board, solicited his talents for **Bonnie Raitt's** *Give It Up*. Holland also got in the studio with bluegrass legend **Vassar Clements** and **John Hartford**. (It was in the same spirit that Holland found himself jamming with **Jimi Hendrix** one fleeting night in 1969 with drummer **Buddy Miles**).

Holland formed his first working quintet in 1983, featuring alto saxophonist **Steve Coleman**, trumpeter Wheeler and trombonist **Julian Priester**. A series of albums recorded over the next four years – including *Jumpin' In*, *Seeds of Time*, and *Razor's Edge* – laid the foundation for Holland's songbook. Subsequently, he formed the Dave Holland Trio (with Coleman and DeJohnette) for the 1988 album *Triplicate*, and teamed with Coleman, electric guitarist **Kevin Eubanks** and drummer **Marvin "Smitty" Smith** for *Extensions* in 1989.

The bassist also continued to enjoy strong collaborations with a vast range of his peers, often connecting with celebrated figures from the previous generation of jazz icons. The following year, Holland got together in a unique trio of jazz legends, drummer **Billy Higgins** and pianist **Hank Jones** to record *The Oracle* – a genuine power summit. Other stellar projects included *Question & Answer* with **Pat Metheny & Roy Haynes** as well as *Like Minds* with **Gary Burton**. This has been a consistent pattern in Holland's career. During the '90s, he renewed an affiliation, begun in the 1970s, with **Joe Henderson**, joining the tenor saxophonist on *So Near (So Far)*, *Porgy & Bess*, and the *Joe Henderson Big Band*. Likewise, Holland reunited with vocalist **Betty Carter**, touring and recording the live album *Feed the Fire*. Fellow Davis album **Herbie Hancock** invited Holland to tour with him in 1992, subsequently recording *The New*

Standard, Holland joined Hancock's band again in 1996 and, more recently, was part of the sessions for *River: The Joni Letters*, winner of the 2008 Grammy for Album of the Year.

Throughout the '90s into the new century, Holland moved from strength to strength, both building and consolidating his position as one of the music's important and creatively seeking bandleaders. He launched his third quartet – and released *Dream of the Elders* (1995), which introduced the vibraphonist **Steve Nelson** to his ensembles. The Pittsburgh native has been a mainstay in all of Holland's bands, save for his sextet, since the mid-'90s. "He's one of the great improvisers I've had a chance to play with," Holland says. "He brings something new to the table every time. I see guys scratching their heads at what he's doing. I wanted a chordal instrument in the group. I didn't necessarily want a piano. I wanted something to give more openness to the music, chordally. Steve's approach to playing can be very spacious at times. He knows when to lay out and when to play. There are often long stretches where he's not playing and then he comes in just at the right moment. A lot of people ask me why I'm using vibes. The reason is Steve Nelson."

Holland also formed his current quintet, which includes tenor saxophonist **Chris Potter**, trombonist **Robin Eubanks** and, a more recent addition, drummer **Nate Smith**. Among their notable recordings are *Not for Nothin*, *Prime Directive* and *Extended Play*.

Eubanks, who has been in Holland's ensembles since the mid-1980s, brings an expansive range to the band. "He can get a very pure French horn-like sound on the high register and can go from that to a real gutbucket sound, and all the points in between," Holland says. "It's really important to me that the musicians are deeply grounded in the tradition of the music but at the same time are looking to move that forward. Not only in their playing but in their composing as well."

Holland first heard Potter when the award-winning tenor saxophonist was about 19, and playing alto with **Red Rodney** at the Blue Note. "I was doing a gig there with Joe Henderson," Holland recalls. Later, he joined Potter on a recording session with DeJohnette and **John Scofield**. "I was struck by the composure he had for a young musician and his sense of balance. He played with a great deal of assurance." Potter also knew Eubanks from their stints in the Mingus Big Band, which already made for great chemistry in the horn section.

Drummer Nate Smith was also quite young when Holland first encountered him, during a visit to the University of Virginia in Richmond, Va., where Smith was a student. After another encounter at a memorial concert for Betty Carter, with whom Smith performed in the vocalist's last years, Holland invited him to join the quintet in 2003. "He's got a great warmth to his playing, a great sense of community," Holland says. "I always need players who can really get into a dialogue with each other in the music and are really listening to each other and are not up there playing for themselves. And, again, he's another fine composer in the band. Because of his generation, he brings a particular perspective to the music, as does Chris, which I really appreciate and enjoy."

When Holland talks about the musicians, it's clear that he's found an ideal mix of talents and attitudes with which to develop a full, complex and exciting sound that is, above all, of the moment. "We're all looking to play music that is relevant to the time we live in," he says. "In the quintet we're interested in a wide range of context for the music to work in. I'm not looking for a book of music that is only following one direction. I'm looking for something that covers a very broad range of approaches to improvisation, a balance between composition and improvisation, and different compositional settings that have different influences on the performance."

Holland has only gathered momentum with the new century. In 2000, he debuted his Big Band and its debut *What Goes Around*. "As a player, I like the situation where you point me in a direction, and let me give a piece momentum," says Holland. "That's my aim, giving everyone in the big band the opportunity to delve into their own creative possibilities. There's a fine line for balance—utilizing the band for my composing and arranging, but also keeping the flexibility and freedom in the music."

Potter, an MVP in multiple settings for Holland, says the leader's "core" bass lines allow him to launch his saxophone improvisations in many different directions. "As a leader, Dave approaches the band as something you wind up and let go," he says. "Of course, he's serious about the music. He wants us all to play at our highest level. He's very curious to see how far we can take an idea and run with it."

In 2005, Holland formed Dare2 Records, after a 34-year relationship with ECM Records, the label where he became a signature artist. Originally, Holland created Dare2 Records as an imprint "to have more control over the entire process of releasing an album," he says. "But in the long term, there's a lot of promise in making music this way, especially with the changing environment in the recording industry." Sharing the bandstand with the best of a younger generation of players in his fan-favorite quintet, he now has three albums out on Dare2: the Grammy-award winning *Overtime* (2005), *Critical Mass* (2006) and *Pass It On* (2008). The debut recording from the Dave Holland Octet, entitled *Pathways*, will be released on March 23rd, 2010 on Dare2 also. As he has in his music, Holland has embraced change and new ideas in business like few of his generation or younger.

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