

AZAR LAWRENCE

BY ANDY THOMAS



Photo by Craig T. Mathew

An unsung hero of spiritual jazz, Azar Lawrence reached a new audience in the early '90s through the radio shows and club spins of DJs like Gilles Peterson and Patrick Forge. For people searching beyond John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders for transcendent saxophonists, Lawrence's first two albums for Prestige, *Bridge Into The New Age* (1974) and *Summer Solstice* (1975), became something of a holy grail.

Further digging revealed that the spiritual intensity of these albums was born out of Lawrence's teenage years in Los Angeles as a member of Horace Tapscott's Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra and three studious years as a sideman of McCoy Tyner in New York, playing on some of those monumental mid-'70s albums for Milestone.

One of those LPs was *Enlightenment*, recorded live at the Montreux Jazz Festival on July 7th, 1973. In the crowd that night, for a performance Tyner would later claim was the best of his life, was Milestone producer and owner Orrin Keepnews. Witnessing the power of Azar Lawrence's horn firsthand, he approached him with the proposal of an album deal.

Assembling a heavyweight band of American and Brazilian players, Lawrence recorded the duo of spiritual jazz albums for Prestige he is best known for. Within those two landmark recordings are "Forces of Nature," "Novo Ono," and "Summer Solstice" which became anthems of the early jazz dance scene in the UK through DJs Paul Murphy in London and Colin Curtis in Manchester.

But the story of Azar Lawrence doesn't end there. Thanks to an introduction by his friend James Mtume, Lawrence joined Miles Davis for the famous concert at Carnegie Hall in 1974 that became the album *Dark Magus*. In the same year Mtume, who played percussion on *Bridge* into the New Age, called on Lawrence for his fabled Afro-Centric cosmic fusion album *Rebirth Cycle*, released in 1977.

Now in his 70th year, the saxophonist and flautist continues to make healing music with the Azar Lawrence Experience, wielding a comparable spiritual power as his great ensembles of the mid-'70s.

Azar Lawrence was raised in the Los Angeles district of Baldwin Hills amongst a growing community of middle-class African Americans. His first instrument was the violin and thanks to the tutorship of his mother, who taught music and led the church choir, he played in the Los Angeles Junior Symphony when he was just five years old.

His mother was also the source of his love of jazz. "She would listen to K Jazz Radio all the time," says Lawrence. "I remember hearing Lee Morgan's 'The Sidewinder,' then John Coltrane's 'My Favourite Things' for the first time. All these records were just coming out and on the air all the time."

It was through a moment of fortune that he made the transition from violin to saxophone. "I was about nine years old when one day a friend

of my father's came by to play by our pool and he brought this alto saxophone, and when I heard that there was an immediate connection," says Lawrence. "I turned to my father and said, 'That is it, that is the sound and the instrument I want to play'. And he was like, 'Ok, let's go and get you one'."

His father, who counted Kamasi's father the saxophonist Rickey Washington as a school friend, invited a music teacher by the name of Mr. Schumacher to tutor his son once a week. The young Azar then began playing with the band at Dorsey High School Jazz Workshop, an important breeding ground for young black musicians in Los Angeles. "That was really significant in my life because Dorsey had some very prolific young players," says Lawrence. "They included the great pianist Herbert Baker who became an important person to me. After we played in the Jazz Workshop we would come back to our house and play together around the grand piano."

An even more important foundation came under the mentorship of Horace Tapscott in the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra and its associated Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension. The bandleader first heard Lawrence play at the Malcolm X Arts Center before inviting him to join the Ark. "I started working with the Arkestra in my senior year at high school at the free concerts that took place at Foshay Junior High School," says Lawrence.

Like the Watts Happening Coffee House before it, Foshay Junior High School became an important hub for the Arkestra both in music and discourse. "The whole community of like-minded individuals would be gathered there," says Lawrence. "On the break, everyone would mingle and I was able to talk to Horace and meet a lot of important people in my life like Ernest and Ray Straughter."

Other Arkestra stalwarts Lawrence played alongside were pianist Nate Morgan, trombonist Lester Robinson, reedman Will Connell, and saxophonist Black Arthur Blythe. "There were all these incredible people in the organisation that was the Horace Tapscott community so it was very enlightening to stand amongst them," says Lawrence. "It was an opening of my mind to establish a connection with my inner self and this music."

As well as being a nurturing bandleader and supportive figure to his community, Tapscott was a profound musical guide. "Horace taught me about freedom but with the discipline," says Lawrence. "To be truly free with meaning one would have to have a command of his instrument through discipline in order to reach that free state."

One of the great friendships he made during this time was with Reggie Golson, son of the great hard bop tenorist and composer Benny Golson. "Reggie and I immediately became great friends and would go to his house where he had this really large collection of albums," says Lawrence. "He really educated me on everything."

During visits to see his friend, Lawrence received some sage advice from Benny Golson as the young player started to find his own voice on the saxophone. "He would always say, 'The sound is inside of you' and that really stuck with me," he says. "I can pick up one saxophone that is very different from the other and I still sound like myself whatever I'm playing. The metal object is only a tool for us to express what is inside us."

It was through Reggie Golson that Lawrence would get his big break. "One day he said to me, 'Come on, we have to go to the airport to pick up Elvin Jones'," he recalls. "That night Elvin was performing at The Lighthouse, a famous club out here at the time. I took my soprano along and Elvin walked up behind me and said, 'You might get the chance to use that thing'."

After the show the powerhouse drummer, who had formed his own band The Elvin Jones Jazz Machine after leaving the John Coltrane Quartet in 1966, invited Lawrence to a rehearsal with a band that included bass player Gene Perla and saxophonist Steve Grossman. "I had no idea I was auditioning but afterwards when I was packing up Elvin came over and said wait a minute, 'You're with me ain't you? I've got a plane ticket for you,'" says Lawrence.

With saxophonist Dave Liebman leaving to join Miles Davis' group, Lawrence became a member of The Elvin Jones Jazz Machine touring band in 1973. "You could say my time with Horace Tapscott prepared me for my time with Elvin Jones but nobody can really prepare you for Elvin," says Lawrence. "Oh man, his level of musicianship was so profound. Later on, when I got to play with McCoy Tyner he told me that in their great Quartet with McCoy and bassist Jimmy Garrison, Elvin was on the same level as a musician as Coltrane. And I could see that because his knowledge of time was some genius stuff."

It was the start of a five-year musical partnership as well as a lifelong friendship, with Lawrence moving in with his elder and his wife Keiko. One of their regular gigs was at New York's Village Vanguard where McCoy Tyner's band regularly played. When an out-of-town gig with The Elvin Jones Jazz Machine was cancelled, Lawrence got the chance to play alongside Tyner. "I went down to the Village Vanguard and McCoy asked if I wanted to play something and I said yes," he recalls. "At the gig people went crazy at how I played and out of the corner of my eye I was watching McCoy. He came up to me and asked me all these questions about the music. We exchanged numbers and the next day I got the call. And that was it - that was my dream as a musician."

Replacing saxophonist Sonny Fortune, who had been with McCoy Tyner since 1970, Lawrence joined one of his great heroes. "Like with Elvin, a large part of the John Coltrane Quartet sound

was McCoy and what he brought chorally that allowed Trane to do what he was doing," he says. Having played alongside Elvin Jones when he was just 19, Lawrence wasn't to be daunted by the responsibility of joining Tyner. "It was like hand in glove both on a personal level and musically," he says.

As well as touring across the world with the group, Lawrence appeared on two of McCoy Tyner's many great albums for Milestone, *Sama Layuca*, and *Atlantis* from '74 and '75 respectively. It was through working with Tyner on these records that Lawrence learned about the nuances of African and Brazilian rhythms and how they related to jazz. They would be the platform for his own spiritual jazz albums.

On tour with McCoy Tyner at the Montreux Jazz Festival for the album that became *Enlightenment*, featuring one of Lawrence's greatest solos for Tyner on "Walk Spirit, Talk Spirit", Milestone's owner and producer Orrin Keepnews joined the group for a cruise across Lake Geneva. "On the inside sleeve of *Enlightenment* you can see a photo of us on the lake and that is where Orrin approached me and said, 'I would like to offer you a record deal'," says Lawrence.

For his debut for Prestige, Lawrence assembled a heavyweight band that included Billy Hart and Leon "Ndugu" Chancler on drums, Woody Shaw on trumpet, Arthur Blythe on alto sax, Joe Bonnor on piano, Hadley Calliman on flute, and his old friend Mtume on percussion.



Photo courtesy of Ed Marshall Photography NYC

Produced by Orin Keepnews and Jim Stern with arrangements by Ernie Straughter, *Bridge Into the New Age* took its name from a chant used by Lawrence in a meditation. He had practised meditation since the early '70s as a student at the Aquarian Spiritual Center in Los Angeles. It was owned by Dr Alfred Ligon whose Aquarian Book Shop had been an important hub of spiritual and cultural knowledge for other seekers like Eddie Straughter and Pharoah Sanders. "The time studying within those walls led me on my own spiritual path including this Serapis meditation," says Lawrence.

He relayed the idea of including the chant in the album to Orin Keepnews and recited the passage of the meditation. "When I got to the words 'Bridge Into the New Age,' Keepnews stopped me and said that's it that's the album title right there."

The chant would become the intro of the closing track "The Beautiful And Omnipresent Love" recited around gongs, bells, and shakers before the voice of Jean Carne - who also used the name Jean Carn - and Lawrence's horn take flight on a 10-minute dedication to the Lord. "Even before I thought of making an album, I was compiling a list of people I was really fond of musically and Jean Carne was one of those as I had always adored her voice," says Lawrence.

Jean Carne came to Azar Lawrence's band fresh from her duo of albums with husband Doug Carn for the Black Jazz label. On the title track, she delivers one of her great vocal performances, with Lawrence's horn swirling around a sea of drums and percussion by Billy Hart and Guilherme Franco, one of a selection of Brazilian musicians Lawrence brought into this band.

His love and knowledge of Brazilian music had grown during his time with McCoy Tyner. "He had a lot of interest in all those kinds of rhythms and I was heavily influenced by him," says Lawrence. "That's where all that emerged from and why were so well matched."

The album is perhaps best known for its jazz dance classic "Forces of Nature," arranged and written by Ernest Straughter and featuring the blistering interchange of Lawrence and Black Arthur Blythe's horns, the congas of Mtume, and the killer bass of John Heard. Writing in his blog *The Bottom End*, one of the original dancers at London's Electric Ballroom in the early 1980s, Seymour Nurse wrote, "'Forces Of Nature' was a huge track in the Jazz Room at the legendary Electric Ballroom. It was a real test for the kids to dance to."

Just as much of a test was "Novo Ono" from Lawrence's second album for Prestige, *Summer Solstice*. A jazz dance classic that first got played on the scene by DJs like Paul Murphy at The Horseshoe in London (see the story in issue 07) and Colin Curtis at Rafter's in Manchester, the track featured a serious collection of Brazilian players. This included trombonist Raul

De Souza who played on so many jazz dance anthems, drummer Guilherme Franco, pianist Dom Salvador, and acoustic guitarist/vocalist Amaury Tristao who penned the track.

The theme of Summer Solstice came from Lawrence's ongoing spiritual practice. "Once again that was part of my experiences with the Aquarian Spiritual Center where we would learn about the solstices and their significance, so I drew a lot from my studies," says Lawrence. "It was only recently that I discovered from Pharoah shortly before he passed away that he and John Coltrane also used to go to the Center. So that was a very important place for a lot of us."

Another important figure in Lawrence's life was James Mtume, who also sadly passed away in 2022. "We met at the Watts Jazz Festival in 1970 and our friendship grew when we both moved to the East Coast," says Lawrence. "He would show up when I was playing with McCoy Tyner and he started bringing Miles Davis down, who he was very close to at the time. And that is how I came to work with Miles."

The pinnacle of Lawrence's tenure with Miles Davis was the incredible concert at Carnegie Hall in March 30, 1974, recorded as the *Dark Magus* album. "Let me just say this in that one concert standing next to Miles was like 40 years of experience," says Lawrence. "His knowledge and own experiences were just dripping off him. Just the way he was carrying himself even before he played that horn. The way he looked over me with his big bubble glasses on. The whole thing was mind-boggling."

The concert was to be heavily improvised as Davis sought to break all the rules of jazz and further the experimentations of his run of albums - from *Bitches Brew* to *Get Up With It*. The night before Miles called Lawrence with some words of guidance. "He told me these concepts of atonality," recalls Lawrence. "At the concert, I thought, 'Ok, let's just let this thing go'. But for many years a bit of the conversation would emerge from my subconscious. That is how deep he was. He told me a lot of things that led me in a different way. And as time has gone on I have dissected these concepts."

In the same year, James Mtume - who also appeared on *Dark Magus* and *Bridge Into the New Age* - invited Lawrence and a cast of some of the deepest players around, including Cecil McBee on bass, Billy Hart on drums, Stanley Cowell on piano, Jimmy Heath on soprano, Leroy Jenkins on violin with Dee Dee Bridgewater and Jean Carne of vocals, into the Minot Sound Studio for the session that would become the Afrocentric cosmic fusion album *Rebirth Cycle*.

Rebirth Cycle, which eventually saw the light of day in 1977 on Third Street Records, could be heard as the sequel to Mtume Umoja Ensemble's *Alkebu-Lan - Land Of The Blacks (Live At The East)*, recorded for Strata East in 1972. "Mtume had some really advanced ways with his music and



Photo courtesy by Chuck Koton



Photo courtesy of Ed Marshall Photography NYC

the way he played percussion was very different,” says Lawrence.

Mtume was also featured on Lawrence’s next album for Prestige. Released in 1976, *People Moving* saw Lawrence following the jazz-funk fusion path of many of his peers. Recorded with producer/writer Skip Scarborough, of Earth, Wind & Fire fame, and musicians such as pianist Jerry Peters, guitarist Lee Ritenour, drummer Harvey Mason and singer Patrice Rushen, the album included versions of Scarborough-penned EW&F tunes, “Can’t Hide Love” and “Gratitude.” It was certainly a diversion from the spiritual jazz of his previous two albums, but in reality, it wasn’t so much of a shift for Lawrence. “You have to remember I had already worked with groups like The Watts 103rd Street Band with the great Charles Wright,” he says. “I was introduced to Skip Scarborough by Ernest Straughter who I had told I was endeavouring to record some music of a funk-like nature.”

Only the deepest diggers will know Lawrence’s next venture, the disco funk project Chameleon whose self-titled album from 1979 was produced by Fred Wesley and overseen by Executive Producer Don Mizell. Something of a hen’s teeth rarity of disco and boogie, his 1985 follow-up *Shadow Dancing* reached new ears thanks to a re-issue in 2022 by the Today Waves label. “During that period I had dropped off the scene but moved back to LA from New Jersey and began writing new tunes for all genres of music for Capitol Records,” says Lawrence. “This included three songs with Maurice White for Earth Wind & Fire’s *Powerlight* album. At the end of the day, I’m a songwriter and I can compose in various different areas of expression.”

Through the 1980s Azar wrote and recorded for figures as diverse as Busta Rhymes and Phyllis Hyman. It was only in the mid-2000s that he returned as a force in jazz.

In 2008, he was joined by fellow LA players pianist Nate Morgan (Nimbus West), bassist Henry Franklin (Black Jazz), and drummer Alphonse Mouzon for the album *Prayer for My Ancestors*. Recorded for the short-lived label Furthermore Recordings, the album soared with the spiritual energy of those classic mid-’70s albums.

Azar Lawrence’s ability to call on serious players saw him bring in trumpeter Eddie Henderson and Rashied Ali (John Coltrane’s drummer in his latter years) for his follow-up for Furthermore Recordings, the 2010 album *Mystic Journey*. The surging spiritual jazz of the title track confirmed the return of Lawrence to the height of his playing and composing powers on an album that also included a version of McCoy Tyner’s “Walk Spirit, Talk Spirit,” with other tracks written by pianist Benito Gonzalez. The album was dedicated to Rashied Ali, who sadly passed away shortly after the recording.

The 2018 album *Elementals*, co-produced by Tracy D. Hannah, took its name from the four

natural spirits of earth, air, fire, and water, a subject that Lawrence has studied closely since the early ’70s. The album evoked both those classic mid-’70s albums for Prestige and the sessions he worked on with McCoy Tyner.

For his most recent album *New Sky* from 2022, again co-produced by Tracy D. Hannah, Lawrence worked with some of the same players as on *Elementals*. This included long-standing co-writer and pianist Benito Gonzales, percussionist Munyungo Jackson, with the addition of Blue Note’s Nduduzo Makhathini on piano, and three guitarists. On the title track, the band was joined by vocalist Lynne Fiddmont for a song of hope written amidst the darkness of the pandemic. “After the pandemic, I felt like there is a new vista of expression and experiences available to us to respond to these new energies, and how as spiritually conscious musicians we endeavour to be enlightened to what is going on here,” says Lawrence. *New Sky* was dedicated to James Mtume who passed away shortly before its release.

We are speaking a few days after the Azar Lawrence Experience performed a memorial concert for his old friend Pharoah Sanders on what would have been his 83rd birthday. With the group back in the studio over the winter and festival dates coming together for the summer of 2024, this feels like an important new chapter in a long history of his creating jazz with a purpose. “The spiritual side of my music never left me,” Lawrence concludes. “On each one of my albums, I try to carry a spiritual message through a golden thread that connects back to *Bridge Into the New Age* all the way to where we are now. So that’s what I have been participating in over the last 50 years.”

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Azar Lawrence · Bridge into the New Age




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