

# CITY NEWSPAPER

## MUSIC PROFILE: Gerald Clayton Trio

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"I'm striving for complete honesty," says pianist Gerald Clayton. "Everything I'm playing is something that's coming from inside. PHOTO PROVIDED

Many of today's top jazz artists adopted the music after being turned on by a great album, concert, or learning experience. Pianist Gerald Clayton was born into it. His father, bassist and arranger John Clayton, played in the Count Basie Orchestra before co-founding the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra. "I was exposed to the lifestyle behind the music," says Clayton. "I saw a lot of sound checks and rehearsals and grown men showing each other so much love, just for the music."

At the age of 26, Clayton, who plays Saturday as part of the Exodus To Jazz series, is one of the hottest young pianists on the scene. His first CD, "Two-shade," was highly acclaimed, and last year he placed first among "Rising Stars" (Piano) in DownBeat magazine's Critic's Poll. The concert celebrates the release of his new album, "Bond."

If his father's musical prowess wasn't enough, his mother, a linguistics professor at California State University, Northridge, is a classical pianist. His parents started him on the piano early but did not take a "Tiger Mother" approach.

"They were very good at not pressuring me into anything I didn't want to do," says Clayton, "but at the same time they instilled the idea that if I was going to play piano I should take it seriously."

Clayton has early memories of falling asleep at concerts and recitals, but he was wide awake when, in third grade, "I played a talent show at my school. My dad wrote out a boogie-woogie for me. That performance brought me so much joy, to play and to feel the reaction of the crowd. They say it's an addictive thing, and I think that's when I caught the bug. It just felt right, like I'd be doing this for the rest of my life."

Clayton's father had been a protégé of Ray Brown, Oscar Peterson's bassist. He was also artistic director at the Hollywood Bowl and when Peterson played there, Clayton was able to meet him and shake his hand. "I grew up with that music, singing along with 'Night Train.' That was my first memory of falling in love with records and thinking, This is the way the piano should be played. I just told him how much I loved his playing."

As a teenager (and in college) Clayton had three of the greatest piano teachers anywhere: Shelly Berg, Kenny Barron, and Billy Childs. Barron's method was the most unorthodox.

"I'd go in and just play a duo with him," says Clayton. "He would just play and play. I'd ask him, 'What's up Kenny? What kind of advice do you have? What do you think about my left hand? What should I be working on?' And he said, 'Just play, just play, you're fine, just play.' I got a lot from recording those lessons and listening to them afterwards and just watching him. He's one of the most relaxed pianists ever. When he sits down at the piano he looks so Zen."

By 2006 Clayton was strong enough to qualify for the prestigious Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. Judges included Herbie Hancock, Billy Taylor, and Randy Weston. He was 22.

"It was great to hang with 13 other really great jazz piano players," says Clayton, "and the judges were so esteemed." But, he adds, "the idea of judging music or art is foolish. You're judging apples and oranges. So what you're really going for is to play for those masters and to get some kind of feedback from them."

Was he nervous? "It's a heavy panel, but I was taught a long time ago nervous energy is selfish energy. So I always try to think, when I'm stuck in my own ego, let me focus on the music and let the rest happen."

Clayton came in second.

Aside from superb technique and stylistic flair, improvisation is a large factor in the competition, not to mention a jazz career. Clayton's approach to soloing is not about pyrotechnics.

"I'm striving for complete honesty," says Clayton. "Everything I'm playing is something that's coming from inside. I'm not just letting my fingers do the work. I'm truly, honestly, invested in every note. I open and see what happens, see what's going on around me, and enjoy riding the wave of uncertainty. I don't think I've achieved that; it's something I strive for."

Clayton, who grew up listening to the Fugees, Lauryn Hill, and D'Angelo, is not a jazz snob. "I worked in a studio in high school and did hip-hop, r&b, and pop," says Clayton. "If an artist comes along and wants to make music with me and I feel it's worthwhile, I'm open to it."

But he believes jazz can also attract a wider audience if promoters become more creative about the presentation. "I have a friend in L.A. who's been putting on jazz shows. But at the break there's a DJ who's spinning hip-hop, acid jazz, fusion. At the same time there's an artist painting. It becomes more than a jazz concert. It's an artistic event and it brings out a lot of different types of people and they dig all of it."

Clayton has his own trio, with bassist Joe Sanders and drummer Justin Brown. "It's like a blank canvas. All three of us are equal contributors and nobody should bogart the music at any given point. Justin and Joe's influences and musical ideas are just as relevant as mine," he says. But he hasn't cut the family ties.

He also plays in The Clayton Brothers, a quintet, with his dad and his uncle, saxophonist Jeff Clayton. "I grew up listening to all the records and going to the recording sessions so it's a part of me," says Clayton. "When I hear that music it really touches me and goes deeper than trying to fit a certain vibe. It's a familial vibe."