

# LIFE ON PLANET BOOGIE

Former Miles Davis saxophonist turned acclaimed solo artist **KENNY GARRETT** releases his new album, *Do Your Dance*, this month, with its burning mixture of turbo-swing and Afro-latin jams hot-footing the distance between rhumba and rumination, boogie and brainwork. **Kevin Le Gendre** spoke to the alto-sax dynamo during his recent sold-out run at Ronnie Scott's about the importance of connecting mind, body and spirit

**W**ith a capacity of 2,000 the Salle Marcel Helie in Coutances, Normandy makes for an impressive sight when full. This headliners' venue at the Jazz Sous Les Pommiers festival, one of France's premium cultural events, becomes an even more magical setting when its patrons vote with their feet, exit their seats and loosen their limbs. Last year they did so with joyous abandon at the climax of a Kenny Garrett gig that shot off the scale in virtuosity and sheer energy.

*Do Your Dance*, the alto saxophonist's new album is greatly informed by that concert and several others during which people saw fit to react in a very demonstrative way to the music, which in some cases meant taking to the podium to bust a move with the musicians themselves.

"When I see people dancing it's something that I feel, so if they're feeling it too then it's a great thing," Garrett tells me on the phone from his London hotel during a recent UK tour. "The last concert we played before we came to Europe was really incredible. We played at this college and there were young and old people who came up to do their dance. I wanted people to come up and be spontaneous with us."

Transparent as the title may be, *Do Your Dance* designates more than whatever the hot step of the moment is. The expression is one of the great tropes of R&B, but also implies a distinctly political empowerment in African-American culture by way of its focus on the

personal, namely the call to do *your* dance, not a dance, or the dance. This is well in line with Isaac Hayes' hot buttered cry to 'Do Your Thing', an assertion of movement as a liberation of the mind as well as body.

As a Detroit native who spent his formative years in the company of many superlative musicians who straddled the boundary between black popular and art music, above all trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, a long haul warrior in the Ray Charles Orchestra, Garrett is aware that a player's individuality, the way he flexes with an instrument as well as the way he

**"I always want serious music, but I want people to dance too"**

dances through a solo, is a core value in jazz, soul and funk.

Tellingly, Garrett, who has played with a kind of holy trinity of the trumpet – Woody Shaw, Freddie Hubbard and Miles Davis – is keen to state that his aesthetic should elicit a wide range of responses that one might associate with both concert hall and night club. "I always want some serious music and I also want people to dance too," Garrett says. "I guess I don't like to say 'serious' but some people say, well you guys are so serious and it's true, but when they see the music turn a corner they're like 'Wow! We had a great time'. That's what I want."

His 1984 debut *Introducing Kenny Garrett* made it clear that the alto saxophone had a major new champion, an exponent who supplemented the soulfulness of the Cannonballs and Crawford's with a pummelling rhythmic drive that has only become more pronounced over the years. Garrett's tenure with Miles Davis upped his profile further but a string of excellent albums throughout the 1990s, notably *Songbook*, saw him emerge as a composer with a gift for yearning melodies that were often based on non-western scales, drawn from Japan in particular. When cleverly melded with fiery gospel-soul grooves the results were irresistible, as was proven by 'Happy People', the title track of Garrett's 2002 album that has become so high on fans' request list they will lift every voice and move their bodies for it. Garrett is aware of the history of jazz as a genre to which folks would buck, bug, lope and lindy hop.

"Some people are attempting to bring it back to dance, to what it was," the 55 year-old argues. "But for me, the way I understand music is that I'm listening to sounds and trying to reflect whatever I feel. We got away from dance, but I just like people to be free when they take the journey with us, and sometimes the journey is not only about the dance, it's about spiritual music, or it's about a beautiful ballad.

"When I think that I've taken people on that journey and we end up where we end up and we're dancing and having a great time they mightn't remember anything but the end part. But at least they know that they've taken a journey. When I played in the Duke Ellington





Orchestra, directed by Mercer Ellington, they were dancing to swing. We've gotten away from it somewhat, but it's still there, really.

"When we played in Philadelphia there were some people who really understood the music and they were like, 'OK, we can dance to the swing, we can dance to the funk, we can dance to the latin, we can dance to all of it.' They were older. They understood that you could dance to all of it if it was presented right and that's what we're saying with 'do your dance'. Some of the younger generation... they don't really get into it the same way, but some younger people have found at gigs that they're hearing some music and they can also have a party. It's having fun but also doing something with stuff to listen to. For me that approach is... that's me being me... doing my dance."

As Garrett makes clear a wide rhythmic spectrum – groove to swing via Afro-latin and Eastern sounds – has been a defining feature of his work for many years, and as much as his inveterate love of Motown, Coltrane and 'island' music partly explains the predisposition, he has an interesting point to make about how touring opportunities afforded to him as a musician have played their part. He found broadcast media in the Old World to be far less narrow than it is in the New. "I've always liked all the genres to be together," he says. "I never wanted to separate them. I actually got that from being in Europe and listening to the radio, and I was like, 'Wow, they listen to everything,' whereas in the States it would be like *only* R&B or *only* hip-hop or *only* jazz. But I never thought of it that way at all. I always wanted to have everything together. I've always heard music like that. I've always heard music where you could play *all* of it on the same stage. I felt you could play every style you wanted to as long as it was authentic."

Musical eclecticism is not the only thing at stake here. The wider ramifications of Garrett's touring outside of America are no less significant, first and foremost because of what his experiences at home and abroad reveal about the persistence of cultural stereotypes.

"The typical thing to think is 'Oh, he's an African-American so I don't know any other things outside of my culture, like black people just know black culture. But I'm always trying to study and be better. What I tell musicians is instead of staying in the hotel get out, go to the museums, the galleries, the places of interest, learn things. I think you have to be open because when you're open you can learn, so go out and take some time and see things. When I go to a different country I like to just get out and mingle with the people, and see who I'm gonna be dealing with tonight, that helps. I know a few words in many languages, but it helps me a lot, as it opens up a conversation." ■

# **Kenny Garrett**

## Do Your Dance

Mack Avenue ★★★★★

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**Kenny Garrett (as, ss), Mista Enz (v), Ronald Bruner, McClenty Hunter (d), Corcoran Holt (b), Vernell Brown (p), Rudy Bird (perc) and Mista Enz (v). Rec. 2015.**

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Although Garrett has played a fair amount of electric music throughout his lengthy career, notably with Miles Davis in the 1980s, he has become of late the archetypal acoustic warrior, with his post-millennial output geared mostly to quartets or quintets with outstanding rhythm sections. Yet while the spirit of one of his key role models, Cannonball Adderley, runs through his work, alto giant Garrett has been anything but conservative. Here his *modus operandi* entails subtle subversions of the vocabularies of swing and post-Trane modalism, pushing traditions from within rather than without. Afro-Cuban percussive elements are infused to create something that is not standard latin-jazz, soulful backbeats are deployed to create something that is not soul jazz and the excellent Mista Enz drops rhymes in a setting that is not jazz-rap. Familiar waltzes with unfamiliar. Although Garrett has no compunction in embarking upon the improvisatory flights of fancy that brought him worldwide attention in the first place, and his chops are still in great shape, he is perceptibly restrained on a lot of the material, which is as much song-based as solo-centric. The net result is music in which artistic integrity is not at odds with accessibility, and if Garrett has been able to catch the ear of 'urban' audiences then it's also worth noting that he led 2,000 people in riotously singing back his choruses when he appeared at last year's superb Jazz Sous Les

Pommiers festival in Normandy, France. They did their dance while he did his. **Kevin Le Gendre**