

Legendary jazz trumpeter Marcus Belgrave has the music in him

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"I feel famous, because I've been able to survive playing music in Detroit,"

says legendary trumpet player Marcus Belgrave, 76.



Belgrave and his wife, Joan, at the Carr Center in Detroit. The couple married in 2007. / JARRAD HENDERSON/Detroit Free Press

Marcus Belgrave, flugelhorn in hand, eyed his quintet in the studio between takes and said, "I want you to know that you're all composers now." He was offering a sly challenge, nudging his charges to a higher plane of invention by reminding them that jazz improvisation is at heart a means of instant composition.

Belgrave was in Studio A in Dearborn Heights on a blistering July day for a Detroit-themed recording for the Blue Note label. Grammy-winning producer Don Was, the president of the iconic label and a native Detroiter, oversaw the date. Was conceived the album as a valentine to the city's jazz legacy, mixing national stars with local roots (James Carter, Sheila Jordan, Regina Carter) with leading lights on the current Detroit scene. An early 2013 release is expected.

No one deserves the spotlight more than Belgrave, the reigning patriarch of Detroit jazz. For nearly 50 years, his world-class trumpet playing, charisma, résumé and commitment to mentoring young musicians -- many of whom have become more famous than their teacher -- have made Detroit a hipper city than it would have been without him. At 76, Belgrave's health is up and down; he uses oxygen 24 hours a day to deal with chronic pulmonary disease. But you would barely know it to hear him play.

In the studio the quintet launched into a sinuous piece with a Latin beat called "Lottie the Body's Mood," written by the late drummer and composer Lawrence Williams and named for a legendary Detroit exotic dancer. The melody is full of tricky intervals, but Belgrave played most of them with a robust tone. He sculpted an improvisation full of surprise, drama, songful lyricism and rhythms that skirted the border of double time.

The band, anchored by bassist Marion Hayden and drummer Gayelynn McKinney, played with more authority than it had before. Belgrave smiled after the take. "Perfect," he said. On the other side of the glass in the control room, Was, his long hair topped by a custom cowboy hat, smiled through a scraggly beard. "Beautiful," he said.

Setting the standard

Belgrave has a featured spot at the 33rd Detroit Jazz Festival, which opens Friday and closes Monday, Sept. 3. The trumpeter's "homecoming" band performs at 8:30 p.m. Sunday at the JP Morgan Chase Main Stage. Trombonist Curtis Fuller and drummer Louis Hayes, two of the all-time greats to come out of Detroit in the 1950s, will join Belgrave and three of his protégés of varying vintage, including Detroit veterans Hayden and saxophonist Vincent Bowens and young pianist Ian Finkelstein. Singer Harvey Thompson also will appear. Belgrave has planned a set of hard bop classics by Horace Silver.

It's almost impossible to overstate the impact that Belgrave has had on musical culture in Detroit or fully capture his role as the conscience and standard-bearer of jazz in the city. Like an African griot, he has come to embody the soul and mythology of the city's jazz history, handing down the values of blues and swing and the wisdom forged through a lifetime in the trenches and associations with Ray Charles, Max Roach, Charles Mingus and other heroes.

Even as Detroit declined, Belgrave remained a deep source of local pride and a direct link to the jazz aristocracy. His record of graduating students to leading roles on the national scene in the 1980s and '90s symbolized Detroit's continued vitality as an incubator for jazz, connecting the dots between the golden age at midcentury and contemporary currents. Belgrave's honor roll includes pianist Geri Allen, bassists Bob Hurst and Rodney Whitaker, alto saxophonist Kenny Garrett, violinist Regina Carter and drummers Karriem Riggins and Ali Jackson.

Belgrave created the Jazz Development Workshop on a shoestring in the early '70s, and there were formal posts along the way with Oakland University, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and others. But he also took his advanced students directly under his wing, hiring them for gigs and placing them in the crucible of the bandstand, where the true education takes place.

"With Marcus there was a pipeline from high school right into a **safety** zone in the scene," said Allen. "We saw the passion and the professionalism up close. What Marcus has done for Detroit and what he's done for all of us -- he truly is a national treasure. How much we all love him can't be expressed in words."

Belgrave's decision to remain anchored in Detroit prevented his national profile from soaring higher, though the cognoscenti always knew there was a giant in Detroit. His cult status grew once his protégés began trumpeting his name in magazines, newspapers and liner notes. In the 1990s, work

with Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center band, a handful of New York gigs and a few sideman appearances on CDs bumped up his visibility a bit, but there are few recordings that capture him in his prime. The best have been self-produced with limited circulation.

The jazz life is never easy, especially in Detroit, and Belgrave has done his share of scuffling. A post at the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio (2001-2010) brought some financial security, and a \$50,000 Eminent Artist award from the Kresge Foundation in 2009 was like a bear hug of gratitude from the community.

But fame and fortune have never been a goal. "Actually, I feel famous, because I've been able to survive playing music in Detroit," Belgrave said. "Major musicians would say, 'What is Marcus doing in Detroit?' But I had to find a place where I belonged, and where I could have an impact. Being around all of this young talent gave me a sense of community and a purpose. I became a catalyst."

Dizzy, Ray, Mingus

Last week Belgrave talked about his life while sitting in the living room of the Ann Arbor home he shares with his third wife, Joan, a singer 21 years his junior. The couple married in 2007 and divide their time between her Ann Arbor house and his Detroit residence.

Pneumonia and related pulmonary issues stalk Belgrave like a mugger waiting to pounce, and it's not uncommon for him to land in the hospital for a few days or a week. Yet the trumpet is literally keeping him alive. He still practices religiously, putting in two hours a day. His doctors have told him the calisthenics have kept his lungs functioning. Even in his hospital bed, Belgrave works out with a muted pocket trumpet.

An elfin 5-feet-4, he has the face of a cherub, a bebopper's beard that's more salt than pepper and an ultrabright smile that could light up the dark side of the moon. His eyes are locked in a permanent twinkle, and he speaks in a cool sandpaper rasp that the ladies love. "We'll be on the airplane and a stewardess will walk by and hear him say something, and she'll take a step back," said Joan Belgrave. "I'll look at her and say, 'I know.' "

Belgrave was born in Chester, Pa., a manufacturing town near Philadelphia and Wilmington, Del. He started blowing a bugle at 4 and a trumpet at 6, taught by his father, a fine amateur musician who played baritone horn.

His cousin was baritone saxophonist Cecil Payne, who played with Dizzy Gillespie's seminal big band, and one of Belgrave's early musical memories is being in Payne's home in Brooklyn listening to Gillespie's saxophone section rehearse in the '40s. Before long Payne was teaching him to play Charlie Parker's "Chasin' the Bird."

At 12, Belgrave began studying with a local teacher and performing with a small concert band in Wilmington that included Clifford Brown, six years older and on his way to becoming one of the most influential trumpeters in jazz. Brown took a shine to Belgrave, helping him learn to improvise by writing out a solo for him on the chords to "How High the Moon."

One day Belgrave asked Brown why he was playing marches and overtures in a community band led by a former circus bandmaster.

"He told me he liked to play all kinds of music," Belgrave said. "That opened my eyes to how valuable *all* music was. I've never forgotten that."

Belgrave joined the Air Force after high school to escape working in the mills. He played in a service band stationed in Wichita Falls, Texas, where

he met Ray Charles one night at a concert and sat in with the band. By early 1958, Belgrave was back in Chester, recently married with an infant daughter, when Charles landed in town for two weeks. On the final night, Charles offered Belgrave a job as second trumpet, giving him an hour to pack his bags. He was 21.

The band included two trumpets and two saxophones, though Charles sometimes played alto sax too. He was in the throes of inventing soul music, grafting gospel influences onto rhythm and blues, but jazz and swing were fundamental to his aesthetic.

The road was brutal. Five-hundred-mile days. Sleepless nights. The segregated South. Twenty-five bucks per gig less expenses. But the camaraderie and Charles' genius were compensatory pleasures, and Belgrave made his first recordings with the band, playing brassy solos full of bebop curlicues on "Blues Waltz" (1958) and "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1959).

"I had to learn patience," Belgrave said. "I wanted to play bebop, but I had to learn to play the blues. I played too many notes. And Ray would play such slow ballads that I'd be through eight bars before he got through one. But eventually he let me play obbligatos behind him on a ballad."

Belgrave worked with Charles until 1963, except for a year and a half from 1959-61 when he gave New York a go. The city disappointed him as cold and cliquish, and he didn't work much. Still, he made important connections with two giants, touring for a couple months with drummer Max Roach and recording with the big band of bassist-composer Charles Mingus. He would record another cameo with Mingus in 1974.

"If I had Marcus Belgrave, I'd have the greatest band going," Mingus told *DownBeat* magazine in 1975.

When Belgrave surveyed the country for a place to settle down, he chose

Detroit in early 1963. He was lured by the city's reputation as a jazz mecca and the former stomping grounds of Pontiac-born Thad Jones, whom Belgrave revered. The promise of steady work in the Motown studios was also a major magnet, and he played on numerous Motown sides in 1963-64.

'I want to play like a singer'

Belgrave's identity on the trumpet is unique. His sound is broad and lustrous, and his solos unfold in complete paragraphs of cogent melody, rhythmic wit and emotional resonance. Improvising is about making choices, and Belgrave favors the road less traveled. The marriage of down-home blues and offbeat tangents reflects Thad Jones, whose unpredictable phrasing had a big impact on Belgrave's maturation in the '70s.

"I'm trying to hear the whole picture of the piece," Belgrave said. "The improvisation comes in as a part of being able to feel the whole framework of a song and then you work your way into the flow. I want to play like a singer and feel the rapture of the song."

Belgrave's ability to remain himself in a myriad of styles has always been a calling card. He's recorded bebop, blues, ballads, funk, fusion, free jazz, post-bop and worked all over the country playing and singing the Louis Armstrong songbook. "There's nothing you can throw at him that he can't handle," said Geri Allen. "I've seen him sight-read some things that are just ridiculous and negotiate really complex harmony."

Wynton Marsalis pointed to the irrepressible swing and joy in Belgrave's playing and the gorgeous way he can phrase a ballad. "Just a few notes from his horn evoke the feelings and aspirations of a whole group of people," said Marsalis.

Called to teach

Belgrave fell into teaching in 1970. His friend, pianist Harold McKinney, recruited him to work for Detroit's Metropolitan Arts Complex, a federally funded Model Cities program. Belgrave found the energy and excitement of the students intoxicating. Suddenly, he had a new calling.

He's still at it. On a Saturday afternoon last year at the downtown Carr Center, where Belgrave is a resident artist, he rehearsed with a small group of high school and college students, including Belgrave's own son, Kasan, then 14, who plays saxophone and clarinet.

The rehearsal was supposed to start at 1, but Belgrave, wearing a jaunty leather cap and olive-brown paisley vest, arrived at 1:15 -- punctuality has been a lifelong quest. "Y'all have to excuse me for being tardy," he said a bit sheepishly, removing his trumpet from its leather case.

Belgrave called up "Cool Eyes," a hip and swinging bebop tune by Horace Silver with a lickety-split melodic line and cagey rhythms lying in wait. Belgrave set a deliberately slow tempo and played through the melody with the students. There were lots of mistakes. He said little but kept playing the song with them over and over. Each repetition brought greater clarity as the students' awkward attack slowly began to mimic the fluency and feeling of Belgrave's phrasing.

He never talked down to the students; he treated them like fellow musicians. "Put that accent on the upbeat," Belgrave said. "I want the notes to sing; I want them to have a *beat* to them."

Jazz is an aural art, and Belgrave was teaching the language by ear. An academic watching the scene might have complained about the lack of structure: *But he's not really teaching them anything.*

Yet the reality is he was teaching them everything.

"He just makes things happen," said bassist Bob Hurst, who began working with Belgrave at 15 and six years later was touring with Wynton Marsalis. "He's got a certain focus on the universal truth that's always in his sight, even if he veers off the path a bit. If I knew what that was I could solve all the problems in the world."

For Belgrave, that truth is located within the continuum of history. What connects both his trumpet playing and his teaching is a profound respect for the past as a springboard to the future. The greatest lesson of all in jazz, he says, is to be an individual. But that won't happen in a vacuum, and neither will innovation.

"In order to get to the future, you have to go to the past," he said. "I try to instill that you learn from the masters in your presence and go back and forward from there. In order to find yourself, you have to be cognizant of what went down before you. That's always been my philosophy."

More Details: Marcus Belgrave on CD

- The two Belgrave-led recordings that capture him best were made in the early '90s. "Live at the Kerrytown Concert House" pairs him with three Detroit pianists for three tunes with the Tommy Flanagan Trio, duets with Geri Allen and a quartet with Gary Schunk. "Working Together," released in partnership with the late drummer and composer Lawrence Williams, features Williams' beguiling songs with pianists Kirk Lightsey and Allen and bassists Rodney Whitaker and Ralph Armstrong among the sidemen. (Both CDs are on the Detroit Jazz Musicians Co-Op label.)
- Belgrave's "Gemini II" (1974), a progressive fusion album dressed in period exotica, documents his association with Detroit's Tribe cooperative (P-Vine Records/Japan and Soul-Jazz/UK under the title of "Gemini").
- "Kirk 'N Marcus" (1986) is the better of two CDs for Criss Cross that pair

Belgrave and pianist Kirk Lightsey. The other is the pianist's "Lightsey to Gladden" (1991).

- For Belgrave as a sideman, look for Geri Allen's "The Nurturer" (Blue Note) and Horace Tapscott's "The Phantom" (Arabesque).
- From 1958-59, "Ray Charles at Newport" and "The Genius of Ray Charles" contain Belgrave's first recorded solos on "Blues Waltz" and "Alexander's Ragtime Band."