



Search

[ HOME ] [ CLASSIFIEDS ] [ PAST ISSUES ] [ ADVERTISING ] [ CONTACT ] [ SOUTHLAND PUBLICATIONS ]

- ?
- ?
- ?
- LA Giants: The Good Neighbor Gronk**
- LA Giants: Jim Brown Maleness, Unbridled**
- LA Giants: Guardian Suzanne Lummis of Angeles**
- Healing Azar Lawrence**  
The South L.A. saxophonist turns heads and improves vibes through his musical life's fruitful second act
- A Day Without A Day Laborer**
- ?
- John Famiglietti of HEALTH**
- ?
- Youngest In Charge**  
Letters to the Editor
- ?
- Treat Street**
- ?
- Meena Shukla**
- ?
- Fine Dining, in Noir**  
Royale on Wilshire Serves Retro Glamour

?

## Healing Azar Lawrence

The South L.A. saxophonist turns heads and improves vibes through his musical life's fruitful second act

~ By GREG BURK ~

?

? I'm walking around squinting at numbers in the sun, lost in tenor saxophonist Azar Lawrence's South L.A. neighborhood. And his sound comes tumbling through the air like a voice in the wilderness: This way.

Funny how circumstances change the way a guy presents. Onstage in a suit, his wide frame and beetling brow make him come off like posse muscle. Here, smiling in a T-shirt at his apartment, he looks as if he might hand you a hamburger.

Lives lived in music often follow spiral paths, and for the last few years Lawrence has been returning to the era following 1967, when John Coltrane had just departed the earthly plane and a new era of idealism and racial equality seemed to be chugging around the bend. Lawrence hadn't yet penned songs for Earth, Wind & Fire, or become a staff songwriter at Capitol Records. Cultural boundaries were falling; sax solos were expanding; teenage Lawrence was taking off.

After young Azar's mom subjected him to the violin, from which he retains a certain fluidity of line, Lawrence was seized by the saxophone. Still in high school, he met Horace Tapscott, the pianist-bandleader and community leader who left such a revolutionary imprint on the South L.A. minds of the '60s and beyond.

"He had just written a song," remembers Lawrence, 54. "And when he put the music up there, it was on scraps of wood – some had paint on them, like if you broke up a picket fence." Writing rebel music on a broken fence was a trenchant symbol, but Tapscott also offered Lawrence and many other rising musicians real-world experience, piling them onstage for the free concerts he mounted with his big Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra.

It was a crucial boost. One of Lawrence's best friends was Reggie Golson, son of the great saxophonist Benny Golson, and among the valuable contacts Reggie made for Lawrence was with Coltrane's low-grooving drummer, Elvin Jones.



Get your own - Open publication

Click to View Magazine

?

### The Deep V

Now in over 20 colors.

### The Deep V

Now in over 20 colors.

**The Hot Corner**  
Heliotrope Dr. &  
Melrose Ave.



**JANUARY [08]**

“Elvin had given Reggie a drum set, and Reggie really schooled me in Trane,” says Lawrence. “He had a whole room almost full of albums, and a turntable. Benny would answer questions ... .”

Not a bad entrée. Jones was sufficiently struck with Lawrence to pack him along at age 19 to New York, where he lived with Jones and Jones’s wife, Keiko, for two years. When Lawrence turned 21, his first tour was with – drum roll – McCoy Tyner, Coltrane’s rippling pianist. He would be with Tyner for over five years.

Credits kept piling up. Lawrence made his own albums, and appeared on the records of James Mtume, Miles Davis’s percussionist, who introduced him to Miles. That’s Lawrence’s tenor you hear blurring and testifying on Davis’s crazy electric Dark Magus live album from 1974.

Lawrence also had a feel for soul and funk, which is how he made the connection with a little band called Earth, Wind & Fire. He co-wrote three songs for the 1983 album Powerlight with EWF’s Maurice White – a soul/jazz straddler himself who’d drummed with Ramsey Lewis. And the two held something else in common.

“We ran into each other when he had just taken a group to Egypt,” says Lawrence. “He said, ‘Man, I’m glad I saw you – you’re the only one that could understand it.’”

With its staggering ancient black heritage, Egypt was a huge symbol for heat-seeking African-Americans in the ’70s – just look at the pyramids and ankhs on the album covers of Pharoah Sanders, Mtume, and Earth, Wind & Fire.

And Lawrence was way into that shit. Since the early ’70s, he’d been hanging at South L.A.’s Aquarian Spiritual Center with a certain Dr. Ligion (la-GONE), who professed a connection to Egyptian healing methods.

“Sounds, when utilized correctly, open up the various centers within us and cleanse our auras,” says Lawrence. “The various tones correlate to the vertebrae and the nerves.”

Lawrence likes to think his own playing fulfills a prophecy. “One has refined his craft enough to where it starts to exhibit this godliness, where the Most High can come through. The vibratory rate is high enough that the creative energies can operate without burning you up.”

Lawrence wants to open a clinic to exploit these insights, but right now he’s got some healing to do here at home, where his 90-year-old mother, Ima, is lying on the couch.

She’s got cancer; Lawrence is taking care of her. Glad to do it. A fine classical pianist from Oklahoma who could play most anything by ear, Ima Lawrence taught him a lot about music.

His lineage is important to Lawrence; it’s part of this whole spiritual journey. His father, Azel, came from a long line of Azmen stretching back to Morocco. In Egypt, Azar is equivalent to Osiris, the underworld god who makes things grow.

Mom and Dad raised Azar to get along with everybody. Their Baldwin Hills home had a pool, and all the kids came over; in the ’60s, Azar and his brother were “the first black surfers on the block,” listening to Jan & Dean and the Beach Boys.

Lawrence just has that quality – you meet him and you want to



do stuff with him. He didn't have huge experience as a songwriter, but he hooked up with some of the '80s' hottest producers.

"I've met a lot of guys that were great writers and had great reservoirs of songs," says Lawrence. "But my songs, every time I'd write one it would get placed with a major artist."

He says the same thing about his sax skills: "There's a lot better saxophone players – they probably hire me just because I have a funny face."

Well, no. Check him out on his Legacy and Music of John Coltrane, or Henry Franklin's If We Should Meet Again, both albums released this year. The guy can leap through 30 notes in one breath, inflecting each phrase with a personal caress. When he does Trane, it's scary how close his vibe approaches the original, though Lawrence's tone is darker, more soulful.

Steven Isoardi, author of The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles, remembers a night a couple of years ago at the World Stage, the Leimert Park arts center where Lawrence logged so much history with Horace Tapscott and the great L.A. drummer/inspiration Billy Higgins.

"People were jammed outside the door on the sidewalk," says Isoardi. "He was playing so powerfully and compellingly that most of us were standing and yelling during his solos. I had never done that before! Afterward, everyone was saying that he was playing better than when he was with McCoy!"

Many perceived Lawrence's return to the stage as a comeback – not that he saw it that way himself. It was a return to jazz, maybe, and when the World Stage crowd beheld a sax-toting Azar, it surely looked like a homecoming. He had been away, in the bowels of the entertainment industry. In the late '70s, he was involved in producing a pop group called Chameleon; he did tons of session work; there was the songwriting.

"I took on so much that I think I burned out," says Lawrence. "And next thing I know, some drugs slipped in and what have you, and I went down a little path for a minute. You have to plant a seed in soil first. So all the muck and mire that we go through is like the soil for it to rise up and sprout and blossom."

Past associations with Freddie Hubbard, Marvin Gaye, Ike and Tina Turner, Frank Zappa, Stanley Turrentine ... there's a limit to lists. And anyway, Lawrence has his own story to tell.

The circumstances hardly matter. In November, for instance, Lawrence was performing at the decadent Vibrato Grill club way up in the canyons of Bel-Air, about as far from the folding chairs of the storefront World Stage as you can get. Sitting in with bassist Pat Senatore's house band, he's running through standards.

It's a date night. People are there for dinner. Lawrence stands stern in his black suit, looking as if he's guarding the drapes.

But every time he takes a solo, rolling into it like the call to evening prayer, the room gets a little quieter. Heads turn, like, "Who's this guy?" And as the applause spreads wider in the fifth and sixth song, Lawrence's expression changes. He's smiling now, bowing a bit.

He's got to bow to get out of the way, you know. So the Most High can operate. □

*Azar Lawrence plays with his Horace Tapscott-tested regular band – pianist Nate Morgan, bassist Trevor Ware and drummer Fritz Wise – at the Crowne Plaza in Inglewood (1.10); Vibrato in West L.A. (1.17), Charley O's in Van Nuys (1.25); and the Hollywood Bar & Grill (1.26).*

Jan 2008

© 2007 Southland Publishing, All Rights Reserved. Development and Hosting **OurGig.com**