

Todd Marcus

bass clarinetist, clarinetist, composer, bandleader

www.toddmarcusjazz.com

Baltimore bass clarinetist, composer, and arranger Todd Marcus is one of the few jazz artists worldwide to focus exclusively on use of the bass clarinet as a solo instrument. While most uses of bass clarinet in jazz typically lean towards avant-garde and free-music styles, Marcus' playing presents the instrument with a modern straight-ahead jazz approach. His playing and compositions swing with fiery intensity balanced with delicate introspection, draw from elements of his community work, and often incorporate the Middle Eastern influences of his Egyptian-American heritage.

Marcus has presented music for 15 years and along the way received accolades including a Jazz Hero Award from the Jazz Journalists Association in 2017, Maryland's \$25,000 Baker prize in 2014, selections as a rising star by national jazz magazine Downbeat annually in its critics poll since 2013, an NPR pick for one of the top 10 jazz albums of 2012, and a JazzTimes pick for one of the top 40 albums of 2015.

Born and raised in the northern New Jersey suburbs of New York City, the half-Egyptian Marcus began music at age six with early piano lessons. He picked up clarinet at age 10 first playing band then classical music repertoire. While in high school, an English teacher who also played New Orleans style jazz piano would introduce Marcus to jazz. But upon trying to join the school's jazz band, Marcus was told saxophones, not clarinets, were the reed instruments allowed in the band and he was turned away.

In 1994 Marcus moved to Baltimore, MD to study political science at Loyola University and again attempted to join the school's big band. This time Marcus was allowed to play and embraced the opportunity. With this first exposure to modern jazz along with a friend's borrowed jazz records of artists like Oscar Peterson, Stan Getz, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane, Marcus began to further explore the music by learning improvisation from records and teaching himself theory and harmony. "I started exploring and realized I would have to figure out how to understand theory and harmony. So I'd just mentally drill myself by thinking - Ok, what is the minor 7th of an E dominant chord? - just exercises like that. And then of course, I learned a lot by just sitting at the piano and plucking away till I could play chord progressions."

While at Loyola, Marcus also began volunteering at a local chapter of Habitat for Humanity in west Baltimore's Sandtown-Winchester community. He soon began to build relationships with community members including a life-long resident and pastor, Rev. C.W. Harris, who mentored him about the African-American community's rich legacy of the arts and jazz, segregation challenges, and battles to overcome decades of poverty resulting from destruction by 1960's riots, flight by black professionals, and an influx of drugs. Harris' mentoring nurtured Marcus' interest in Civil Rights era history, its deep connection with the jazz music of that time, and Marcus' feelings of the need for greater racial reconciliation in America. With a resulting belief in a need to be engaged in community-based revitalization, Marcus left college and in 1997 moved into the neighborhood doing community work by day and pursuing his ongoing study of jazz at night.

1997 also marked an important move for Marcus musically as he made the switch from clarinet to bass clarinet shortly after hearing the work of jazz legend Eric Dolphy on the instrument. "I felt it offered a lot more options than regular clarinet," Marcus explains. "It hasn't been easy because of challenges the bass clarinet presents on a sonic and mechanical level but I've worked to present the horn as an equal to saxophones in a straight-ahead playing context. With so few examples of people playing bass clarinet in modern jazz though, I think it's ended up being an opportunity for me to chart some new territory for the instrument."

In late 1998 Marcus returned to New Jersey to complete his college degree in urban studies with two semesters at Rutgers University. While there however, he spent a majority of his time at the school's jazz department. Though not a music major, he was accepted by audition into the department's jazz combos getting his first experience of performing in quartets, trios, and composing.

By mid 1999 Marcus was back in Baltimore working again with Rev. Harris where together they have worked since to run Intersection of Change (intersectionofchange.org), a nonprofit addressing poverty related issues in the community. These efforts have resulted in the establishment in 2000 of Martha's Place, the organization's recovery program for women overcoming substance abuse and homelessness, Jubilee Arts, a program established in 2008 to offer arts classes, entrepreneurship, and community beautification for children and adults, and Strength to Love II in 2016 which operates an urban to address the community's food apartheid crisis and need for employment opportunities. Work to date has resulted in significant neighborhood community revitalization through the full renovation of six previously vacant and dilapidated buildings, transformation of 18 vacant lots into community green spaces and meditative gardens, creation of three dozen neighborhood murals, and conversion of 1.5-acres of vacant lots into an urban farm.

Marcus' music career has also grown during these years as he has charted new ground on the bass clarinet and developed as a composer and arranger with his Todd Marcus Quintet, Quartet, Trio, and Duo as well as his nonet, The Todd Marcus Jazz Orchestra. In 2006 he released his debut album *In Pursuit of the 9th Man* with his Todd Marcus Jazz Orchestra as well as his Todd Marcus Quartet's 2012 release *Inheritance*. He again featured his jazz orchestra with 2015's *Blues for Tahrir* and in 2022 with *In the Valley*, a 2018 quintet album *On These Streets*, and the trio album *Trio+* in 2019.

Though self taught in jazz theory and composition, Marcus' compositions draw largely on intricate but lyrical straight-ahead jazz, classical influences, and over recent years have also increasingly explored the Middle-Eastern sounds from his Egyptian-American heritage. His work includes international performances, clinics, and radio play and he has worked with other jazz artists such as Gary Bartz, Bennie Maupin, Don Byron, Ralph Peterson, Larry Willis, Odean Pope, Gary Thomas, Joel Frahm, Tim Warfield, Warren Wolf, Sean Jones, Xavier Davis, George Colligan, and Orrin Evans.

Marcus's work includes regular performances in Baltimore, Washington DC, New York, and Philadelphia as well international performances, clinics, and radio play. He was a featured artist in 2017 Jazz Tales Festival in Egypt, 2015 Cairo Jazz Festival in Egypt, and in 2005 at the 1st World Bass Clarinet Convention in Rotterdam, Holland.

"My adult life has really been about being a part of and serving my community by day and cultivating my music by night," Marcus shares. "I think I've always felt upset by the injustice of inequities in the world and so being a part of my community has allowed me to specifically deal with ongoing issues that stem from systemic racism and poverty. And at the same time, my music has allowed me to try to create some beauty that hopefully unites people across all races through the power of music."