

DAVE HOLLAND

Biography

2007-2008

At the pinnacle of his career, **Dave Holland** has settled into the unassuming role of jazz master. The multi-award and poll-winning bassist, composer, arranger and bandleader leads two of the most vibrant groups in jazz: the Dave Holland Quintet and the Dave Holland Big Band. He has collaborated in two of the top jazz collectives of the decade: the ScoLoHoFo quartet comprised of Holland, **John Scofield**, **Joe Lovano** and **Al Foster** and the **Herbie Hancock**-piloted all-star quartet including **Wayne Shorter** and **Brian Blade**.

Though he's too busy to be fully engaged in outside projects, Holland has played on recent **Roy Haynes** albums and recorded trio dates with such leaders as **Geri Allen** and **Kenny Wheeler**— all outings that he says he could not pass up. He even has taken his recording career into his own hands, launching his own label imprint, Dare2 Records in 2005 (distributed by Sunnyside in the U.S., Universal Music Jazz France internationally), after a fertile three-decades-plus association with ECM Records.

A onetime sideman with two titans of jazz, **Thelonious Monk** (a short tenure) and **Miles Davis** (a seminal experience during the trumpeter's *Bitches Brew* era), Holland made his debut as a leader in the early 1970s. He broke in as a leader with *Music for Two Basses* (1971) with **Barre Phillips** and *Conference of the Birds* (1972) with a band featuring **Sam Rivers** and **Anthony Braxton**. Holland also expanded his work as a side musician to include recording with a diversity of artists such as **Bonnie Raitt** (*Give It Up*, 1972), **John Hartford** (*Morning Bugle*, 1972) and **Lee Konitz** (*Satori*, 1974).

In recent years, his recording career has continued to flourish, recording such milestone albums as his quintet CD, *Extended Play: Live at Birdland* (2003) and two Grammy-winning big band discs, *What Goes Around* (2002) and the potent follow-up *Overtime* (2005). Continuing this impressive creative streak into 2006, Holland released a new quintet album, entitled *Critical Mass*. The album is the first new studio recording by the Dave Holland Quintet to be released in over five years and marks drummer **Nate Smith's** debut recording with the band.

Additionally *Critical Mass* features Holland's core working-band members **Chris Potter** on saxophones, **Robin Eubanks** on trombone and **Steve Nelson** on vibraphones. All contribute music to the project, in keeping with the leader's supportive role anchoring the band with his bass and encouraging his players to realize their own voices. "I've tried to maintain the supportive role of the instrument and at the same time expand it so that it has more active dialogue with the other instruments," he says. "Someone will write a piece, but it only starts there, and everyone puts in their ideas and how they are going to interpret it. Those are the things you want to do in a supportive way—not vying for attention and competing with each other."

Not willing to rest on his laurels, Holland is committed to taking his music to new plateaus. "I want to continue to stay engaged in my work," he says. "I want it to develop. That's what keeps me interested and involved. I don't want to perform night after night and play in a routine. I want the music to be alive and real. I want to be enthusiastic. By extension, that translates to the audience."

In regards to his quintet, Holland sees his band as representing the evolution of different types of rhythmic structures and forms that has been transforming the face of jazz in the last two decades. In his search to keep the music vital, Holland says the band has delved into the rhythmic traditions of Africa, India, South America and the Caribbean, as well as the innovations in contemporary music in the hip-hop and R&B worlds. "This is historic with jazz," he says. "Jazz has always taken whatever the contemporary music of the day is and integrated it into the language. It happened when jazz musicians took Broadway songs and made them into standard tunes. Now more musicians are writing original music and integrating contemporary aesthetics and styles. We use a lot of references to contemporary rhythmic feels. And, of course, I see the music as both going backward and forward."

In talking with Holland in person, one is struck by his innate shyness as well as a sense of humility. When conversing, his demeanor is similar to his stage presence. Holland quietly leads his bands with a steady bass pulse in sets of swinging originals that display a flawless balance of form and freedom. He evokes a calming effect—relaxed, unhurried, assured.

Born in Wolverhampton, England, on October 1, 1946, Holland taught himself how to play stringed instruments, beginning at four on the ukulele, then graduating to guitar and later bass guitar. He quit school at the age of 15 to pursue the professional music life in a top 40 band. He and his band mates entertained the idea of getting a record deal and, like the Beatles and Rolling Stones at the time, played ballrooms and small clubs around England.

Eager to learn more about his bass guitar, Holland gravitated to jazz players when he was 15. After seeing an issue of *DownBeat* where **Ray Brown** had won the critics' poll for best bass player, Holland went to a record store, and bought a couple of LPs where Brown was backing pianist **Oscar Peterson**. He also picked up two **Leroy Vinnegar** albums (*Leroy Walks!* and *Leroy Walks Again*) because the bassist was posed with his instrument on the cover.

Within a week, Holland recalls, he traded in his bass guitar for an acoustic bass and began practicing with the records. "I loved the richness of the sound and the instrument's expressiveness. But what really knocked me out—and is still the key to playing this music—is the communicative quality of those players. The idea of the communion of playing struck me deeply—how they complemented each other during solos and how they interacted. This was so far ahead of anything I had heard up to that point. I saw a much wider horizon ahead to reach for." He adds, "The emotion of jazz moved me. It knocked me off my feet. I was inspired. I couldn't think of anything better to do with my life than to try to play like Ray Brown and Leroy Vinnegar."

In addition to Brown and Vinnegar, Holland was drawn to the bass musicianship of **Charles Mingus** and **Jimmy Garrison**. Of the latter, he says, "I remember listening to his bass solos. He was one of the first bassists to stand up and play a long bass solo that was truly formed."

After moving to London in 1964, Holland played acoustic bass in small venues and, on the advice of some bassist friends, sought tutorial guidance from **James E. Merritt**, principal bassist of the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Merritt trained him to sight read and then recommended he apply to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Holland received a fulltime scholarship for the three-year program. "It was a new phase of my life in London," he says. "I had my school commitments all day, but was free at night, so I played in jazz clubs."

At 20, Holland was keeping a busy schedule in school, studios and jazz clubs like Ronnie Scott's and Ronnie's Old Place. He linked up with other British jazz musicians, including guitarist **John McLaughlin** and saxophonist **Evan Parker**, and often played in bands that supported such touring American jazz saxophonists as **Coleman Hawkins**, **Ben Webster** and **Joe Henderson**. Additional musicians Holland formed friendships with from 1964–68 included reedsman **John Surman** and South Africa-born, London-based pianist **Chris McGregor**. Plus, Holland worked with Canada-born, England-based trumpeter **Kenny Wheeler**, establishing a

working relationship that still continues today.

At the time **Scott LaFaro**, the bassist for pianist **Bill Evans**, was an important influence. "I was at a party and someone took me aside to listen to an album," Holland recalls. "It was Bill Evans' *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*, and Scott's playing stunned me. I never imagined the bass could be played in such an interactive way—lyrical as well as supportive. Up to that time, the bass was played only in a supportive role, but he liberated it from this and conversed back and forth with Evans."

Holland's most significant non-bassist mentor was Miles Davis, who caught the young bassist at Ronnie Scott's one evening in 1968. Holland played in the opening act during a month-long stint by the Bill Evans Trio. The pianist's trio included drummer **Jack DeJohnette** who recalls Davis being eager to get Holland a ticket to New York. "Miles heard something in his sound and his ideas," says DeJohnette. "He had the gift for hearing intuitively what he could bring out in a musician."

Even though it was a daunting experience to tread in the footsteps of former Davis bassists **Paul Chambers** and **Ron Carter**, Holland came to New York. He recalls that one of his earliest and hardest lessons was how to make his own space in Davis' music, which at the time was electronically evolving. "When I first joined Miles' band, he didn't say much to me. I now know that to be one of his great gifts to artists: to encourage us to not play like the guys who came before us, but to explore our own creative solutions. At the time I remember reading a quote from the Sufi tradition that said, 'Plant your banner firmly in the desert sand.' That resonated with me. I knew I had to figure out what I could bring to the table to represent how I heard and felt the music."

Holland left Davis' employ in 1970 and formed the short-lived group **Circle** (with pianist **Chick Corea**, saxophonist Anthony Braxton and drummer **Barry Altschul**). He then joined saxophonist **Stan Getz's** band, where he served as the musical director for a year and a half, from 1971–72. Concurrently Holland began what turned out to be a long association with saxophonist Sam Rivers, who became a mentor. Holland recalls Rivers giving him a pearl of wisdom: Don't leave anything out, use it all. "That's become almost a mantra for me over the years," Holland has said, "as I've tried to find a way to build a vehicle which lets me utilize the full spectrum which includes the tradition, playing the blues and improvising freely. I love all that music, and there's been a desire to reconcile all those areas, to make them relevant, hopefully, in a contemporary context, as one music."

During the '70s Holland enjoyed many fruitful associations with a range of musicians. He held the bass seat in Joe Henderson's band on the tenor saxophonist's early '70s recordings (as well as on two albums in the '90s). Holland toured with Braxton from 1974–76 and worked on several of his albums, including *New York (Fall 1974)*, 1975's *Five Pieces*, 1976's *Anthony Braxton Live*, *Dortmund (Quartet–1976)* and *Creative Music Orchestra (1976)*. Joining forces with DeJohnette again and guitarist **John Abercrombie**, Holland participated in the collective **Gateway** trio from 1975–77 documented by two ECM albums, *Gateway* and *Gateway 2* (the threesome later reformed in 1994 and recorded two ECM reunion albums, *Gateway: Homecoming* and *In the Moment*).

Another key highlight of this period was Holland's work with vocalist **Betty Carter** from 1975–77. "This was such an important time for me," he says. "Betty was an outstanding artist who was a guide to many musicians. She not only became an important advisor, but also a good friend."

Another significant sideman recording came over a decade later when Holland was enlisted to be a member of pianist **Hank Jones'** trio along with drummer **Billy Higgins** for *The Oracle* recording session (released in 1989 on EmArcy). Holland also worked with Jones on his 1989 Concord Jazz date, *Lazy Afternoon*.

In the early 1980s, after his first solo ECM albums, Holland did his share of musical experimenting. “[That’s] when I decided to form my own band and start developing it,” he says of his quintet that originally featured alto saxophonist Steve Coleman, trumpeter Kenny Wheeler and trombonist **Julian Priester**. “It was a leap of faith, but I wanted to start exploring with a working group that I imagined would be interesting. That idea of taking things on as a challenge and going for it continues to reoccur in my work.”

Holland’s quintet recorded such inventive albums as *Jumpin’ In* (1983) and *The Razor’s Edge* (1987). He recorded a terrific trio disc *Triplicate* (1988) and an equally strong quartet date *Extensions* (1989). In 1995 he released *Dream of the Elders*, a remarkable album of lyrical music marked by moving dynamics. During this period, Holland also released three solo discs: 1977’s *Emerald Tears*, 1982’s *Life Cycle* (recorded on cello which was the only instrument he was physically able to play during a long recovery from heart surgery) and 1993’s *Ones All* (released on the German label Intuition).

Bass solos can be deadly, but in Holland’s hands, the instrument sings. DeJohnette marvels at his musicianship in this setting: “Dave is one of a few bassists who can get an audience on their feet during a solo. He learned from Miles to have a point of view in his playing.” Singling out Bach’s sonatas, Holland says that he’s carrying on a stringed instrument tradition: “On my solo recordings and in my solo concerts, I try to find a variety of ways to play the bass so the music isn’t boring and repetitive. There are different ways of pacing, and, of course, you can turn on a dime when you’re playing by yourself.”

Yet, Holland is best suited to group work. He says he “likes having that feeling of identification with an ongoing group.” These days that’s his quintet, comprising Potter, Eubanks, Nelson and Smith. Formed in 1997, the group offers Holland the opportunity to put into practice lessons he learned from Davis. “I liked Miles’ nondictatorial approach. He steered his bands subtly and used the strengths of his band mates. In my quintet, we all recognize there’s a special quality to what we’re doing. We’re five people with complementary concepts who work in a cohesive way.”

Eubanks says that Holland is his favorite acoustic bass player: “Dave is so solid. He has total control and facility. And he can play whatever style he wants, from straight-ahead to odd-meter, and he can get funky too.” Plus, Eubanks notes, Holland is a rhythm section unto himself. “He fulfills all the time-keeping, rhythmic and harmonic roles.”

Potter says that Holland’s “core” bass lines allow him to launch his saxophone improvisations in many different directions. “As a leader, Dave approaches the band as something you wind up and let go,” he says. “Of course, he’s serious about the music. He wants us all to play at our highest level. He’s very curious to see how far we can take an idea and run with it.”

Holland himself is surprised at times at what his quintet has accomplished. “The improvisational freedom in jazz allows things to happen that you can’t predict. That’s what makes the music so exciting and interesting and allows it to develop unhindered, to a degree. You just have to know when to help it along. I had no idea the music would go in the direction it has.”

As for starting his Dare2 imprint, Holland says it had been in the back of his mind for several years. With all the support and interest in his music, he figured it was time to take the leap of faith and go it on his own. “One of the initial motivations was to be independent, to own my own masters, to have more control over the entire process of releasing an album,” he says. “But in the long term, there’s a lot of promise in making music this way, especially with the changing environment in the recording industry. With the Internet and the new ways of accessing music there’s a new climate that offers independent labels like mine more of a chance of survival.” But not only has Holland survived in the world of independent artists, he has thrived.

The evidence of this is clear. 2005 was a banner year filled with accolades for the bassist having won **DownBeat's** Critics Poll for **Musician of the Year**, **Big Band of the Year**, and **Acoustic Bassist of the Year** (he also garnered top bassist in the 2006 poll). **The Jazz Journalist Association** also honored him in similar fashion, giving Holland its award for both Musician and Acoustic Bassist of the Year. He was the recipient of the prestigious **Miles Davis Award** at the **Montreal Jazz Festival** and was the featured artist at this year's **North Sea Jazz Festival** in The Hague, Netherlands, where he showcased his own bands as well as performed a duet concert with percussionist **Trilok Gurtu**. This year also marked Dave Holland's first appearance at Carnegie Hall's Isaac Stern auditorium leading his own band, a headlining spot on a double-bill with **Wayne Shorter** at the **JVC Jazz Festival**.

Over the years Holland has garnered a slew of awards. He has been nominated numerous times for Grammy Awards in the Best Jazz Instrumental Performance category with his quintet—including 1998 for *Points of Voice*, 2000 for *Prime Directive*, 2001 for *Not for Nothin'* and 2003 for *Extended Play*. He's won three Grammy Awards: 1999's Best Instrumental Jazz Performance for *Like Minds*, 2002's Best Large Jazz Ensemble for *What Goes Around* and 2005's Best Large Jazz Ensemble for *Overtime*.

Holland has received honorary doctorates from the New England Conservatory (Boston), where he held a fulltime teaching position from 1987–88 and where he has been visiting artist in residence since 2005; Berklee College of Music (Boston); and Birmingham University (Birmingham, England). He was also named Fellow of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (London). From 1982–89, Holland served as the artistic director of the prestigious Banff Summer Jazz Workshop through the Banff School of Fine Arts in Alberta, Canada. In addition, he has taught workshops and master classes around the world at universities and music schools.

Holland performed as the soloist in classical composer Mark Turnage's *Bass Inventions* (a concerto for double bass and orchestra) that premiered at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam in May 2001. He toured with the project in February 2002. Holland also received the 2003 IJFO Award for outstanding contribution to jazz. The prize was presented in Toronto at the International Association for Jazz Education's annual conference.

All this incredible momentum continued into the first part of 2006 with the weeklong Dave Holland Festival at Birdland in New York City. In addition to packed performances during the week by his revered quintet and big band, Holland debuted a new sextet, his octet and a duo with his long-time associate and vibraphonist, Steve Nelson.

Shortly before this stellar week at Birdland, the bassist returned to the studio in December 2005 with the quintet to record *Critical Mass*, the band's long-awaited new studio recording. When the album was done, Holland thought about how much went into this record: a year and a half playing together as a quintet, discussing the music, taking it apart, experimenting with it, trying different things. The title of the album came naturally. "At a certain moment, the music has attained a point where it has become what it's going to be," exclaims Holland. "It will continue changing, but it has reached a turning point. It demands to be. When you talk about something reaching critical mass, it has finally reached a point where it just has to happen." Which is not too different from Holland's entire career. He has reached a defining moment. His rich experience as an artist and human being demands to be.

Creatively restless, Holland has been involved with a number of other projects, including his own "mini big band," an octet comprising bass, drums, vibraphones and five horns: trumpet, trombone, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone and baritone saxophone. "Like Duke Ellington did, I wanted to pare down the big band," Holland says. "I wrote some music for it and we toured Europe as a part of a British Arts Council program and performed at Orchestra Hall in Chicago in 2005."

Underlying all of the successes in Holland's career is a joie de vivre in the music itself. "In my

bands, I like being the bass player—in a supportive role as well as exploring melodic and rhythmic ideas—rather than the featured soloist,” he says. “I’m more interested in being part of the celebration. After all, it’s hard to party on your own. For me, the most joyous part of the music is when people’s spirits and hearts come together.”

In October 2006 Holland turned 60. In reflecting on his consistency as a preeminent jazz bassist, he says he feels fortunate in being able to persevere for so long. “When you find yourself struggling against the challenges of the music industry and your rent’s due, those are the difficult times when you are tested,” he says. “Each musician has to make their own decision about how they want their music to serve. When you make the commitment to stay true to your musical voice instead of giving into the temptations of some fantastic offer, that is when your music gets stronger. That’s something I see as a positive result of this commitment: renewed energy. In the end, people do recognize that commitment.”