

Ulysses Owens Jr. *Versatile Timekeeper*

In late April, drummer Ulysses Owens Jr. was back home in New York for 36 hours after a hectic touring schedule that had put him on the road for gigs with Kurt Elling, Nicholas Payton's Big Band in New York and with Payton's quartet in Europe. Owens was preparing to fly to Europe with Christian McBride's Inside Straight before rejoining Elling at the end of May for a six-cities-in-eight-nights run from Istanbul to Budapest.

"They are three completely different personalities," Owens said of the aforementioned leaders. "Kurt's band is a very colorful context, a show, where I'm often playing textures. Christian's band is hard-hitting swing; I think about playing the ride cymbal, getting into that bop bag. With Nicholas, it's more exploratory, an organic vibe like Miles from the '60s. He just starts playing, and you go along for the ride. I feel I'm being blessed to work because I have an ability to tap into where an artist wants to be and where they want to go."

Owens' employers concurred. "He's super-flexible," Elling enthused. "He's a great reader, and he wants to get off the page as fast as he can. He gives you a super-solid second line and a solid funk thing, he swings like a gate, and he's inventive in odd meters. Plus, he's so attentive on the stand to the slightest nuance of volume, of interactivity—I give him the littlest sign, and he's right on it."

McBride noted Owens' assimilation of old-school drum aesthetics. "He drives the band with the ride cymbal and hi-hat, as opposed to a lot of hits and punctuations from the snare and bass drum," McBride said.

Born and raised in Jacksonville, Fla., Owens, 28, learned early on to balance his creative aesthetics with a pragmatic approach to his professional obligations. He recalls the admonitions of his mother, who rose through the ranks to become a senior vice president at Merrill Lynch. "She preached that to be successful, you can't just be in the clouds," he said. "You've got to be able to pay your bills on time."

Owens began playing drums in his parents' Pentecostal church at age 2. He learned orchestral percussion in middle school, and started playing jazz in ninth grade. By 17, he was running a jam session in Jacksonville, interacting with local elders and musicians from Bunky Green's jazz program at the University of North Florida.

He attended The Juilliard School, where he studied with Carl Allen, Lewis Nash and Kenny Washington, and emulated "the touch and finesse" of such younger mainstem avatars



as Greg Hutchinson, Willie Jones III and Kareem Riggins. He soon attracted attention—and gig opportunities—from such leaders as Russell Malone, Mulgrew Miller, Vanessa Rubin and Dr. Lonnie Smith. "During the '90s, everybody's focus was still on swinging, and you could trace what they were doing to the history of the drums," Owens said. "Being taken seriously was about your hands and having it together on the ride cymbal."

Owens noted that his playing "is growing and becoming more diverse," and that he hopes to expand his circle as he enters his thirties. But he will continue to draw on lessons learned during his formative years.

"To me, the Pentecostal church is jazz," he said. "It's all improvisation. At 5 or 6, I'm sitting on the drums, and this little 70-year-old lady would get up and do what we call testimony services. She would tell the goodness of what God had done for her that week, and strike out into a song—no time signature, no anything. The organist has to have ears to say, 'OK, she's in C-sharp,' and I've got to be, 'Is she in 3/4 or is she in 4?' There's no difference between Miss Ruthie-Mae doing that and when Nicholas starts off noodling or when Kurt revs up, and I respond. No difference between deviating from the church program and doing some song for 30 minutes, and Christian saying, 'Keep doing the turnaround on an out-chorus' and pulling off the most magical stuff."
—Ted Panken

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