

61st ANNUAL CRITICS POLL

RISING STAR Alto Saxophone  RISING STAR Flute

Tia Fuller

From Bebop to Beyoncé & Back

By Allen Morrison  Photo by Joke Schot

IF YOU HAPPENED TO BE HAVING dinner at Sullivan's Steakhouse in Denver on a Thursday night circa 1995, along with your filet mignon you would have had a chance to hear three young jazz stars of the future, all in the same extended family.

At that time, the regular Thursday night jazz band, Fuller Sound, was starting to feature the 18-year-old Tia Fuller on alto, her sister Shamie on piano and Shamie's future husband, Rudy Royston, on drums, in addition to father Fred on bass and mother Elthopia on vocals.

But nothing in their mainstream repertoire of jazz standards would have prepared you for Tia Fuller's mature style, as heard on her latest album, *Angelic Warrior* (Mack Avenue): aggressive, hard-charging, but melodic. Her fast-paced, hard-bop compositions often explore tricky rhythms yet convey an unmistakably soulful groove.

It's a long way from that Denver steakhouse to touring the world as a member of Beyoncé's band, and to becoming a jazz headliner in her own right. But, at 37, Fuller has arrived, due to a combination of sheer talent, hard work and a positive attitude.

In an upstairs office at New York's Apollo Theater, following a rehearsal for an all-star concert celebrating the great female jazz artists who have played at the Harlem landmark, Fuller recalled those Thursday night gigs in Denver. "That was where I really expanded my repertoire," she explains. "My dad was always out booking gigs for his girls. He loved playing with his family. I was playing nothing but standards: 'My Romance,' 'I'm Confessin',' 'Cherokee,' 'Night And Day.'" Fuller also sat in regularly at Denver jazz clubs whenever she was not attending classes at Spelman College in Atlanta

(where she earned a bachelor's degree in music) or at the University of Colorado at Boulder (master's in jazz pedagogy and performance).

All that woodshedding in Denver and a decade of dues paying in New York City have paid off. This is proving to be a breakout year for Fuller, and *Angelic Warrior* is her breakthrough album. She has also broken through with the critics, winning DownBeat Rising Star awards for her alto and flute work.

Angelic Warrior showcases her own searching, post-bop compositions and forward-leaning interpretations of three standards. The album features her new family band—the two Roystons on piano and drums and Mimi Jones on bass. Guests John Patitucci on electric and piccolo bass, Terri Lyne Carrington on drums and singer Dianne Reeves make strong contributions. Patitucci plays the guitar-like piccolo bass as a front-line instrument, in virtuosic counterpoint to Fuller's alto lines; Reeves intones a solemn, regal "Body And Soul" over a funky, re-harmonized landscape; and Carrington adds a wildly inventive arrangement of a Cole Porter medley.

Carrington has become something of a mentor to Fuller in recent years. Fuller is featured on her recent leader project, *Money Jungle: Provocative In Blue* (Concord Jazz), and often performs with her band. When not touring with Carrington or her own band, Fuller serves as assistant musical director of Esperanza Spalding's Radio Music Society touring band. Carrington and Fuller co-arranged a version of "Cherokee" for *Angelic Warrior*.

"When I was young, Jack DeJohnette told me that if I wanted to make it, I had to put myself in an environment where the competition is greatest," Carrington says. "Tia definitely did that. She went to

New York City not knowing a lot of people, and over the course of 10 years she really developed her playing and made a name for herself. She developed her own vision as a leader with her quartet."

Scuffling for gigs in New York, Fuller landed a chair in the Duke Ellington Band's regular Monday night gigs at Birdland, eventually getting what she describes as her big break playing with the Jon Faddis Jazz Orchestra. Major gigs followed with Sean Jones, Jimmy Heath and Nancy Wilson.

If the advanced concepts of her playing and composing seem a far cry from her steakhouse days, they are also far removed stylistically from Beyoncé's all-female touring band, in which Fuller played sax for five years. Maintaining a grueling schedule with the pop superstar was rewarding in many ways, she says, but it presented a challenge to her jazz ambitions. "I tried to keep my foot in the jazz door, because I knew that 'out of sight, out of mind,'" she says. "People automatically assume that if you're on tour with an A-list artist, one, you don't need any more money, and two, you're not interested in playing many gigs because you're touring all the time. But anytime I came home, I reached out to people like T.S. Monk and Ralph Peterson to let them know, 'Hey, I'm looking for work!'"

Playing with Beyoncé in giant arenas gave Fuller a new perspective on the importance of presentation. "Sometimes the audience can feel disconnected," she says. "That's why in my shows, I try to reach out to the audience and incorporate them, even if it's just call and response, or clapping on 2 and 4—it's showmanship. I also learned a lot from Beyoncé from a business standpoint. She has my utmost respect as an artist, businesswoman and leader."

Still, being a member of the Beyoncé tour, where



Tia Fuller at
LantarenVenster
in Rotterdam,
The Netherlands,
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every note was choreographed to the split second, was limiting to Fuller musically. “There’s more room for creativity in jazz,” she says. The rigorous work required a month of 12-hour band rehearsals, followed by weeks of 8-hour production rehearsals and more than 100 concert dates a year. “There is only so much room for your individual voice to come out,” she says. Fuller is nonetheless proud she suggested that Beyoncé add “How High The Moon” to her stage show, in the style of Ella and Bird, giving the pop diva a chance to show off her jazz chops.

Fuller’s sister Shamie—whose leader CD, *Portraits*, has received critical praise—credits their parents with inspiring their careers. “When we first started,” she says, “Dad would call tunes we didn’t know, and he’d say, ‘You guys gotta know these standards!’ That’s where Tia and I, and Rudy, too, really got our foundation from: learning standards and playing them on gigs night after night.” Now when Fred and Elthopia Fuller come to their children’s gigs, Fred occasionally sits in, usually on a standard. “He always goes to the mic,” Shamie says, “whether Tia or I want him to or not, to say how proud he is of us.”