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NO RESTIN' FOR WESTON

BY GUY ARSENEAU

NURTURED BY CULTURAL ROOTS firmly linking him to Jamaica, and a lifelong artistic commitment to exploring the African connection to music, Brooklyn resident Randy Weston is today's pre-eminent voice of international jazz. Standing at 6 feet 7 inches, his imposing physical presence is matched by his virtuosity as a musician, which was once characterized by black writer, social activist and intellectual Langston Hughes as, "A combination of strength and gentleness...with an ebb and flow of sound seemingly as natural as the waves of the sea."

Born in Brooklyn in 1926, Weston's interest in music began as a child with classical piano training. Gifted with an unusually fine ear that was attuned to the growing role of jazz in American culture, he was captivated by the sounds of Count Basie, Duke Ellington and, above all, Thelonious Monk. Weston describes Monk as: "The most original jazz player I've ever heard. He played like they must have played in Egypt 5,000 years ago!"

Honing his skills as a jazz artist, Weston moved to Africa in the 1960s, where he settled in Morocco as his home base. During his time on that continent, he traveled to other African nations in search of his musical roots. His most memorable experience during this period was the 1977 Nigerian Festival, an event that drew artists from 60 cultures and served as an epiphany for him. In recalling that time and event, Weston says, "We all realized that our music was different and yet somehow the same. In many ways I came to realize that these various musical styles, samba, jazz and blues, were Mother Africa's message for survival in the New World."

As part of his African experience, Weston also discovered, like so many artists before him, that art in general, and music in particular, is the mirror and soul of society. His 1960 work, *Uhuru Afrika*, a jazz album that celebrated the independence movement in Africa and the vital role traditional African music played in transforming that continent, was ultimately banned by the South African apartheid regime in 1964. Rulers of the South African nation at that time believed that the album, which opened with a poem by Langston Hughes calling for freedom, was too inflammatory.

With a career that spans more than six decades and includes over 47 CDs, Weston's growth and sophistication as a



musician are apparent to even the most casual listener. Among his many important recordings are *Cole Porter in a Modern Mood* (Riverside, 1954), *The Modern Art of Jazz* (Dawn, 1956) and *Marrakech in the Cool of the Evening* (Verve, 1992).

The recipient of numerous awards from art programs, universities and colleges, Weston's accomplishments as a jazz musician have garnered him the honorary title of Doctor of Music from the New England Conservatory of Music (2013), Maine's Colby College (2012) and Brooklyn College (2006). Weston was also awarded the prestigious Composer of the Year Award from *Downbeat Magazine* in 1994, 1996 and 1999. The National Endowment for the Arts also acknowledged Weston's contribution to music with a fellowship as a Jazz Master in 2001. On the international front, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Weston and a group of musicians from the nation of Ghana performed at Canterbury Cathedral in 2002. He also was awarded The French Order of Arts and Letters in 1997.

Maintaining a travel schedule that would induce terminal jet lag in those half his age, the 86-year-old brings his skills as a jazz pianist to audiences in Asia, Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and the Far East throughout the year. "I really don't have a set schedule," Weston says, "I travel on a very impromptu basis." Having just completed a tour of supper clubs and concert dates in Switzerland, South Africa and France, Weston is now preparing for upcoming concerts in the United States.

For New York City based aficionados of jazz and its link to African culture, Weston is a familiar figure at Dizzy's Club *Coca-Cola* where he often performs in an intimate and inviting club atmosphere. For those interested in following Weston's performances, his website is www.randyweston.info.

Randy Weston will appear with Bill Harper and Lewis Nash at the Apollo Theatre on May 10; from May 22 to 25 he will play at Jazz Standard and at the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn on May 31.