



**Saxophonist Bobby Watson Shines Light on
Vital but Largely Unappreciated Black Pioneers
on *Made in America*, Available April 21
via Smoke Sessions Records**

**Album Pays Tribute to Butterfly McQueen,
Madam C.J. Walker, Sammy Davis Jr., Wendell Pruitt,
Major Taylor, and Dr. Mark Dean, Among Others**

While Black History Month provides an annual reminder of the momentous contributions that African-Americans have made to the nation's history, 28 days out of 365 aren't nearly enough to compensate for the neglect those "hidden figures" (to borrow the title of a recent hit film) have suffered in classrooms and history books. On his latest album, *Made in America*, saxophonist and composer **Bobby Watson** does his part to call attention to some vital but largely unappreciated black pioneers in a variety of fields, from politics to pop culture, science to sports.

Made in America, due out **April 21** from **Smoke Sessions Records**, offers a musical portrait gallery of nine influential African-Americans. Listeners may be familiar with some -- surely everyone knows the name Sammy Davis, Jr., while Grant Green, Butterfly McQueen and Madam C.J. Walker will ring a bell with many -- most of them remain obscure despite their history-making achievements.

"This project has been a history lesson for me," Watson says, "and I hope it will be a history lesson for the listeners."

To shed light on these overlooked giants of American history, Watson enlisted a few collaborators with whom he shares some significant history of his own. On *Made in America* the renowned saxophonist is joined by the **Curtis Lundy Trio**, featuring bassist **Curtis Lundy**, pianist **Stephen Scott** and drummer **Lewis Nash**. All four have tenures with the influential singer Betty Carter in common, while the album marks a welcome return to the scene for Scott, who has been largely silent for the last several years.

In a sense, Watson's enlistment of Lundy and the bassist's veteran trio expands the mission of the album itself, finding another too-undersung figure in Lundy himself. "I've known Curtis for over 40 years," Watson says. "He's a groove master, and he knows how to put a trio together. I thought it was only fair to give him the recognition that he deserves on this album."

The same impulse drove the concept of *Made in America*, the honorees of which were in most cases new to even Watson himself before he embarked on the project. "I've been studying black history for years," he explains, "and I would come across these great figures in history whom I'd never heard of. It set me on a path to find other black figures in history that weren't as big as George Washington Carver or Booker T. Washington, and to try to illuminate these folks."

The album takes off, almost literally, with a clever quotation of "The U.S. Air Force Song" -- think "Off we go into the wild blue yonder" and you'll have the refrain in your head -- for "The Aviator." That piece pays homage to Wendell Pruitt, a pioneering military pilot and Tuskegee Airman who was killed during a training exercise in 1945.

Each subsequent piece paints its portrait with similar wit and feeling for the nuance of its subjects. The inspiration that Watson finds in these forgotten innovators comes through in his -- and the band's -- playing throughout the album. Watson's Kansas City roots shine through in the soulful swing and boisterous grooves that make for a hell of a funky history lesson.

Looking back at a history that intersects more directly with Watson's own four-decade career, "The Guitarist" captures the merger of soul and jazz that distinguished the work of Grant Green, which presaged artists like Wes Montgomery and George Benson. Watson bends his notes like a blues axeman on the tune's guitar-like lines. Scott's appropriately fluttering piano opens "The Butterfly," penned for actress Butterfly McQueen, best known from her defining role as Prissy, Scarlett O'Hara's maid in *Gone With the Wind*. Watson evokes the actress' trademark high-pitched voice with his piping alto, while the ultimate tragedy of her life is captured in Scott's aching solo over Nash's wrenchingly whispering brushwork and Lundy's mournful bass moans.

"The Cyclist" and "The Jockey" both pay tribute to landmark figures from the sports world. The former, whose buoyant rhythm seems to spin in time with a bicycle wheel, was written for Major Taylor, the first African-American cyclist to win the world one-mile track cycling championship in 1899, setting numerous world records in the face of rampant racism. Composed by Lundy, the heavy trot of "The Jockey" depicts Isaac Murphy, a Hall of Fame jockey who won three Kentucky Derbies in the late 19th century.

Co-written with Watson's wife Pamela, the anthemic "The Entrepreneur" is an ode to Madam C.J. Walker, whose line of beauty and hair products for black women made her the first female self-made millionaire in the country. Highlighted by the deep gallop of Lundy's bassline, "The Real Lone Ranger" takes a look at Bass Reeves, a U.S. Marshal in the American west thought to be the inspiration for the famed masked man; while the driving, mechanistic rhythms of Scott's "The Computer Scientist" are a nod to Dr. Mark Dean, who holds three of the nine original patents for the first IBM personal computer.

While its title might suggest Muhammad Ali to most, "The G.O.A.T." -- or Greatest Of All Time -- is actually meant for Sammy Davis, Jr. Watson sees Davis as the epitome of the all-around entertainer, and Nash's skittering rhythms are an apt impression of Davis' tap-dancing prowess. "I was always happy to see Sammy on TV when I was young," Watson says. "There weren't many opportunities to see a black man on TV doing the things that he did. I only learned later that he started as a child -- he was like the Michael Jackson of his time."

Watson also borrowed his self-proclaimed theme song, "I've Gotta Be Me," from Davis' repertoire. The classic song closes the album, its lyrics suggestive of Watson's own artistic path as well as the necessary qualities shared by his inspirations on *Made in America*: "I want to live, not merely survive, and I won't give up this dream of life that keeps me alive."

Finally, "A Moment of Silence" allows listeners to bow their heads and reflect on their own heroes. Originally composed for the late Mulgrew Miller, the track was written to last exactly one minute and provide an appropriately elegiac soundtrack to such commemorations.

"This is not your typical jazz record," Watson concludes. "I want to try, in the time I have left, to reflect the things that I'm learning about history, about America and about the world and the people that came before me, and hopefully connect that with some of our young people and older people, both black and white."

"Made in America" was produced by Paul Stache and Damon Smith and recorded live in New York at Sear Sound's Studio A on a Neve 8038 custom console at 96KHz/24bit and mixed to 1/2" analog tape using a Studer mastering deck. Available in audiophile HD format.

Bobby Watson Album Releases Performances:

April 28 - 30 | Smoke Jazz Club | New York, NY

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For more information on **Smoke Sessions Records**,
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