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Willie Jones III, the Drummers' Drummer

By [TIM BRIGHT](#) — *COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTOR*



Photos by Ayano Hisa and Hanayo Takai Willie Jones III on Washington Avenue

[Willie Jones III](#) is a drummer's drummer. He is the son of jazz musician Willie Jones II and grew up in a musical household in Los Angeles. He has played with a who's who in jazz, ranging from legend Milt Jackson to Roy Hargrove. Mr. Jones' bold articulation and innovative sense of swing make him a unique, creative and in-demand musician. He has toured the world and has performed on many records. He has released three records as a band leader on his own WJ3 label and his fourth, entitled *The Next Phase*, will release this summer.

I caught up with Mr. Jones in Clinton Hill, his home base for well over ten years, to discuss the neighborhood, jazz and his next phase.

Tim Bright: Hey Willie. You hail from California, right? Why did you come here?

Willie Jones III: Born and raised in Los Angeles. My father was a jazz musician, so I grew up around the jazz scene in LA and always wanted to be a jazz drummer. Although I came here in 1997 I had visited in 1992 as part of the Thelonious Monk competition. Ever since then I knew I wanted to come back.

TB: When you came in '97 where did you move to, which neighborhood?

WJ: Here in the Fort Greene/Clinton Hill area. My first place was on Gates and Washington. My gym is still the one on Eastern Parkway right across the street from the Brooklyn Library.

TB: What is it about New York City and jazz that makes really good players want to live here?

WJ: New York has always been this way, and even more so now. It's the mecca of the jazz industry and the center of the arts in general, but especially for jazz. All the labels are here. If you want to tour Europe, the best place to be is New York.

TB: For pickup groups or leader stuff?

WJ: Either or. Pickup groups [a group of musicians hired to play for a limited time period] or a permanent gig that tours internationally, New York is the best place to be. It's like, you can be the best musician in LA, a great musician, and everybody will know you there, but they may not know you in New York or Chicago or in Europe. But if you're one of the best musicians in New York, everybody in Europe, Japan and all over will know about it. People know what's going on here.

TB: How has living in this neighborhood influenced your writing or playing as a musician?

WJ: One obvious way is that there are a lot of jazz musicians that live in this particular area, like the great Kenny Washington lives around the corner from me. Carl Allen, the drummer, is close. There are a lot of musicians I work with, know, and admire their skills that live around here. Just being in New York in general, you have to stay on top of your game, be it compositionally speaking, technically on your instrument, or conceptually, because everyone else is.

TB: The push thing.

WJ: The push thing, exactly. That was one of the major differences from living in LA. Here everyone is into improving their skill set. Plus I like the grass and trees here in Brooklyn. When I'm walking down the street and see all the beautiful things, the brownstones and people, it puts me in a certain vibe, a mindset. It's more of an inspirational thing. It's subconscious.

TB: Anything you would change?

WJ: It has nothing to do with music and I'm sure it happens in other cities, but there is always some kind of construction going on. A lot of it. [A saw whizzed in the background.]

TB: Any good places to see jazz in this neighborhood?

WJ: Well there is one on Fulton called [Night of the Cookers](#), they have some good jazz there. Like an organ trio night, and I used to play there when I first got to town. It was happening. Good. Swinging. On point.

TB: What do you think of the current state of jazz? Are we past the golden era of the 1950's?

WJ: That era is unfortunately gone. People still play that [style] but right now it seems it's going towards anything but that. Odd meters, hip hop, world music – that seems to get you recognized. Anything swinging – you're on your own.

TB: Considering that, what's your view on sampling of jazz records? There are a couple big hip hop records that sample jazz.

WJ: I'm for it. I think it's great. I'm a product of the hip hop generation and grew up listening to that too. That is a way for kids who only grew up on hip hop to get them maybe introduced to jazz. It's not the best way but sometimes you got to go with what you can get. As long as the original composers get credit and get paid too.

TB: *The Next Phase* is your fourth straight ahead swing record released on your WJ3 label. How did you conceive the record?

WJ: All of my previous records have the same piano player, Eric Reed. I've known him for over 20 years and he is a big influence on me musically. The premise is it's got to be swinging, and from there I'll write a tune. I wrote one song for this record and had Eric contribute two songs, and all of the guys I used on the record have the same mind set coming in.

TB: What was the recording process like?

WJ: We did it old school. One day of rehearsal and one day of recording. We keep it simple. One or two takes of each song. And sometimes just one take and we would be, that's it. Eight songs on the CD, like when a jazz record used to have six or seven songs — eight is the magic number for me.



Photos by Ayano Hisa and Hanayo Takai

TB: How hard is it to keep the band together?

WJ: I'm just now starting to get regular gigs on my own. Up to this point I would do one-offs in New York and California. But it doesn't make sense to keep making CDs if you're not doing shows where you can actually sell them. I still freelance and play with other people, but I'm doing more shows as a leader. I have a show [as a leader] coming up on June 18 and 19 at Smoke with the same band I made the record with. June 22 through 27 I'll be at Dizzy's with Eric Reed and Cyrus Chestnut, playing with a piano duo.

TB: The show I saw you play at Birdland last week with Joe Lovano was supposed to feature the great Hank Jones, who unfortunately passed away right before. Do you want to say anything about working with Hank?

WJ: I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to play with him. Growing up and seeing his name on so many records and listening to records that I didn't even know was him on piano. I was totally blessed to play with him over the past four years. I learned so much by playing with him. If I can live anywhere close to his age and keep that high level of artistry, my life would be more than fulfilled. He lived to be

91. In November we did two weeks in Europe and he was [snaps fingers fast in time] right there. His mind was sharp, playing incredible. He was right there on top of it. The way I celebrate his life and legacy is to carry on his music the best I can.

TB: Where do you see yourself going with the release of *The Next Phase*?

WJ: Well a lot of things. One, concentrating on doing more shows as a band leader. Two, I'm married now, so that's a new phase for me. And three, WJ3 Records.

TB: Talk a little about your label.

WJ: WJ3 Records came about because no one else would record me. [He laughs out loud at this.] About 10 years ago, like everyone else, I'd given out my demo, but no takers. I've done a lot of records as a sideman. Actually Billy Higgins put the bug in my ear about owning your own music.

TB: The master and publishing rights.

WJ: Yeah exactly. He put the bug in my ear 20 years ago but at that time I was like, 'Yeah okay.' Then in 2000 I made my first CD. Sold some. Got national distribution. Got enough money for another record. Another CD after that. Then Eric Reed said, "Why don't I do a project for your label?" And to me that was automatic legitimacy. Because everyone and their mother has a label. It's like a business card. But to have another major artist on your label is a different story. It's the next phase. So I'm looking for a small roster of people I know and like that I can record consistently.

TB: How about the dwindling CD sales aspect? Touring is still strong, but CDs are down.

WJ: The traditional way is difficult. The days of CD shopping are over. Most people don't do that, although I still do. But if you're a visible touring artist — for example, myself and Eric Reed are people who work all the time — Eric will sell quite a few CDs at the shows. That's the way you can do it. If you have a following and play a circuit, you can do very well. Especially in jazz, if you put on a good show, you'll sell some CDs, because it's an impulse to seeing the show. That's where it's at.