

## Players ▶

## Willie Jones III ▶▶

### Root Force

In the early '90s, when Willie Jones III was still living in Los Angeles, his mentor, Billy Higgins, imparted a piece of sage advice. "Billy told me not to wait for somebody to decide you're ready to be a leader," Jones recalled. This is why in 2000, two years into an eight-year run with Roy Hargrove, he decided to self-produce a CD that would "express how I like to hear music."

"It was just practical," Jones said. "No one was responding to my demos, and my only record with Roy was a strings date [*Moment To Moment*]. I thought, 'OK, one project.' I wasn't thinking about having a record label."

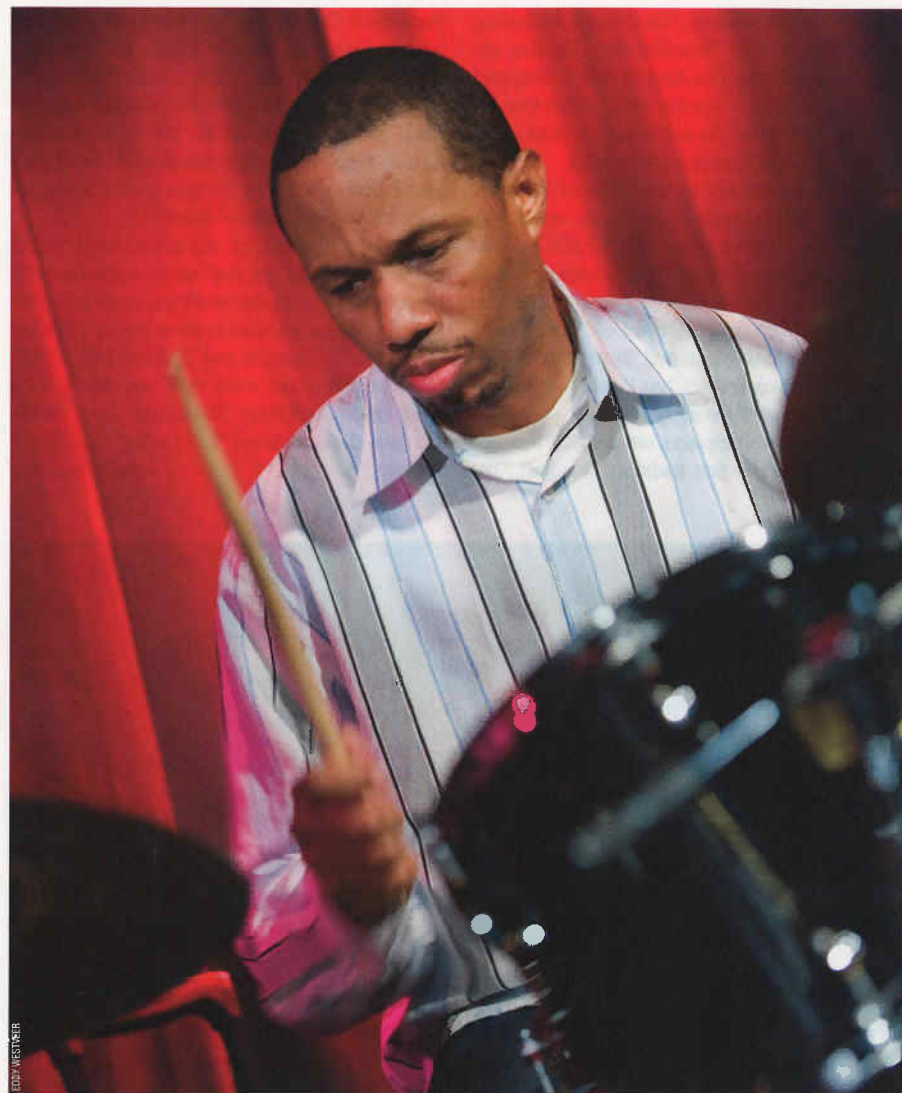
The drummer spoke over lunch near his Brooklyn home a few weeks after a two-night hit at Smoke to celebrate his self-released fourth leader album, *The Next Phase* (WJ3 Records). Jones was also packing for 10 days in Italy with guitarist Peter Bernstein, to be directly followed by three successive weeks in New York—one at the Village Vanguard with his bandmember pianist Eric Reed's trio, and two at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola with a pair of Cedar Walton-led units.

"The common ground among these musicians is that they love to play a style that some call hardbop or straightahead, which I call real jazz," said Jones, who became Hank Jones' drummer of choice in 2007 and held the position until the pianist died this year. "That means rhythmically swinging, with the groove basis on the ride cymbal. Change the rhythmic base, it's a different style. I've felt like this since I was a kid, and that's how I'll always think."

"A lot of musicians concentrate on putting European classical or Cuban influences into jazz," Jones continued. "Now, I'll record a straight-eighth tune or a tune in seven, and I can work in clave. But if you totally emphasize those aspects and aren't swinging anymore..." Jones paused judiciously. "Well, you can debate what's swinging and what's not. But to me, the music has gone too far away from the root."

"Willie has a West Coast swagger in his swing, with a looseness that isn't lackadaisical and an edge that isn't overwhelming," said Reed, whose second WJ3 release comes out in February 2011. He connected with Jones in Los Angeles 25 years ago, on a gospel gig with Jones' preacher uncle. "He can tell you when so-and-so stopped playing brushes or started to play the cymbal without the bell," Reed continued. "But there's nothing academic about Willie on the bandstand. He leaves the textbook at home and plays music."

For influences, Jones cites Philly Joe Jones, Higgins and Max Roach as soloists, Roy Haynes for left-hand comping on the snare, Tony Williams for ride cymbal feel, as well as Jeff Watts, Lewis



Nash, Kenny Washington and Greg Hutchinson. "You take a little bit of something from everybody," he said. "When I solo, whatever I play, I don't want the musicians to have to count to come back in. As long as you can recognize the song form, I go from there."

The namesake son of a working jazz pianist who took him to matinee gigs from age 5, Jones absorbed the sound he loves from such Los Angeles luminaries as Teddy Edwards, Oscar Brashear, George Bohannon, Hampton Hawes and Larance Marable. He got "serious about practicing" at 14, studied with Albert "Tootie" Heath and James Newton at Cal Arts, worked locally with Edwards and Billy Childs, and attended Thursday night jam sessions run by Higgins at his performance space, the World Stage.

"I'd watch Billy practice there at midnight, which is the best drum lesson you can get," Jones said. Higgins urged his protege to move to New York, an aspiration fueled by repeated listening to

Hargrove's early '90s quintet—"a bunch of young guys playing music the way I like to hear it"—at Catalina's.

Jones prepared and positioned himself to relocate, first with Black Note, which made an early splash—albums for Sony and Impulse, opening for Wynton Marsalis on a European tour—and spent several years playing around California before disbanding. He saved up while touring several years with Arturo Sandoval, and made the move in 1997. "To reach your full potential, you have to play with musicians who are better than you," Jones said.

Thirteen years later, well-established as a top-call musician, Jones is looking to grow and sustain his WJ3 imprint.

"I'd like to be a small, boutique label with maybe six or seven artists that records the type of jazz that I like—period," Jones said. "I see myself evolving as a leader, but I'll always play as a sideman—I like other people's music." —*Ted Panken*