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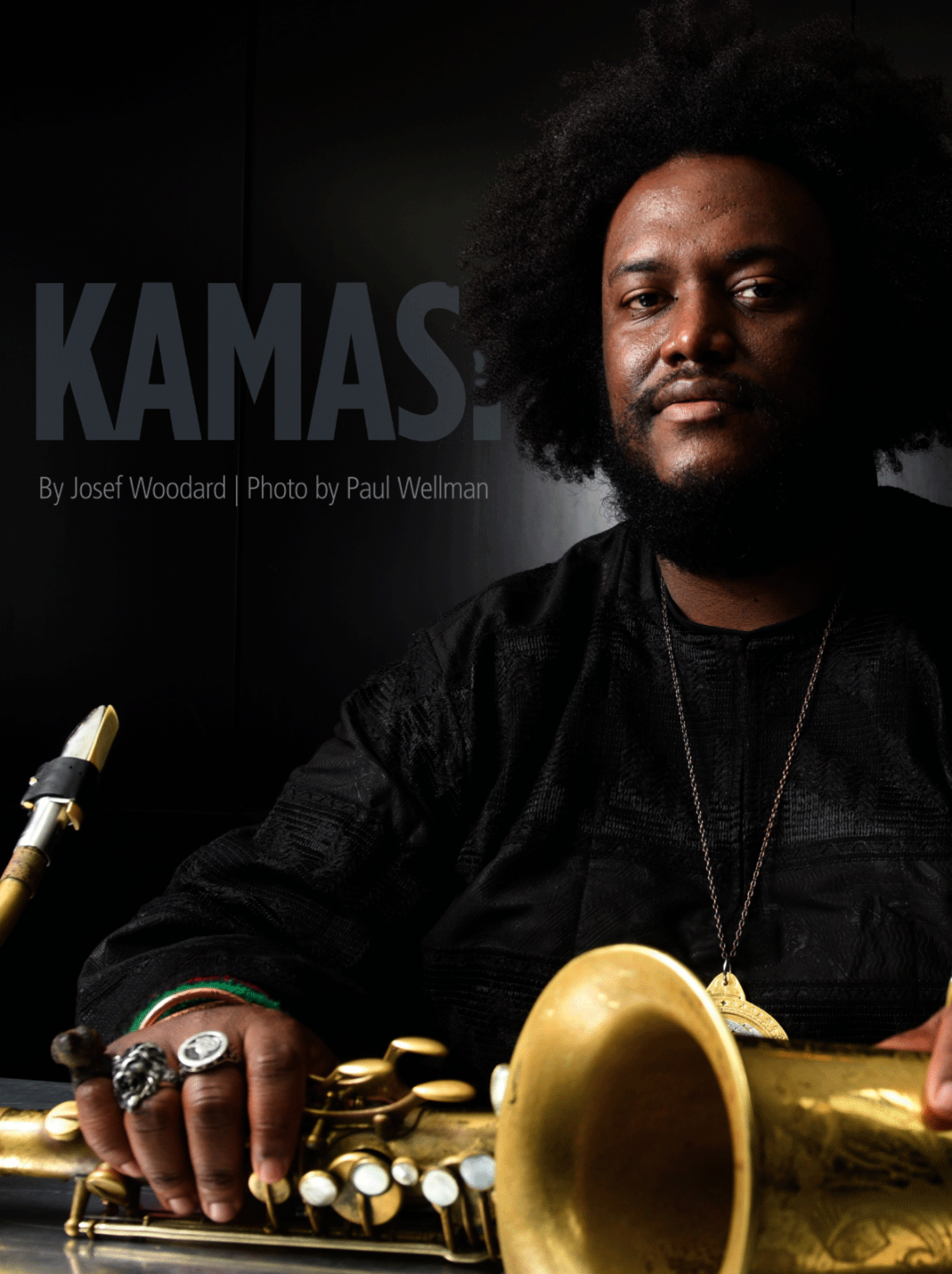
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KAMAS!

By Josef Woodard | Photo by Paul Wellman



‘All the Doors Opened’ WASHINGTON

ON A RAINY MARCH DAY IN LOS ANGELES, newly anointed jazz star Kamasi Washington was out to meet the press. Donning a colorful dashiki and with his ample complement of an Afro tucked into a knit cap, he sat in a conference room in the offices of his management firm, Atom Factory. The occasion? A *DownBeat* cover story. The 35-year-old saxophonist and bandleader spoke at length about his collective of players, who go by the moniker the West Coast Get Down, and of matters of musical integrity and jazz lineages. He emphasized how the jazz world has not fully appreciated the long tradition of serious jazz in inner-city L.A.—the scene from whence he sprang, nurtured by his father, the reedist Rickey Washington.

Relevant to Washington’s meteoric rise in the past 14 months is the fact that Atom Factory is based in a building located just a few blocks away from the massive Sony Pictures compound in Culver City, California. It’s also a mere five crow-flying miles—yet a cultural chasm away—from The World Stage, a grassroots jazz club and community hub in the Liemert Park area of South Central Los Angeles. Owned by the late, great Billy Higgins, The World Stage was, in the ’90s, a vibrant training ground for the young Washington and many of his dedicated musical friends now touring the world with him.



Washington was a collaborator on rapper Kendrick Lamar's Grammy-winning album, *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

Washington, whose star has risen precipitously based on the power of his distinctively uncompromising three-disc set, *The Epic*, is one of the more surprising and artistically respectable “overnight sensations” in recent jazz history. In 2016, he’s already played the massive Coachella rock festival, and he’ll bring his jazz message to other high-profile events, such as Bonnaroo (June 10), the Ottawa Jazz Festival (June 22) and the Newport Jazz Festival (July 29 and 31), as well as riding the groove of the fest circuit in Europe, including the Lowlands Festival in the Netherlands (Aug. 20) and the Dimensions Festival in Croatia (Aug. 25). These bookings are a far cry from the L.A. venues where he and his collective honed their music over a 10-year period before the world came calling.

Recorded over a creatively dense month with a dozen musicians, including vocalists and strings, *The Epic* was released on the Brainfeeder label, owned by Flying Lotus, aka Steven Ellison. It came out May 5, 2015, in fateful, cosmic sync with the critical and commercial buzz surrounding Kendrick Lamar’s jazz-infused hip-hop masterpiece *To Pimp A*

Butterfly, on which Washington and others from his collective also play important roles.

Musicians in Washington’s crew bring to the table a dizzying wealth of experience. Their resumes include work with Rihanna, Snoop Dog, Chaka Khan, Lauryn Hill, Raphael Saadiq, Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder. Keyboardist Brandon Coleman, a dedicated member of the West Coast Get Down ensemble, spoke about the sense of musical rightness in the group, going back a decade. “I already knew, from the git-go,” he asserts, “that this music was going to be as big as it is. I think all of us kind of knew. We just didn’t know exactly how to facilitate it, how to get it out to the people. We were literally strategizing. Once we all got together and recorded, that’s when we knew we had something, for sure.”

One hallmark of the band’s sound is the taut yet relaxed interplay of Washington’s tenor saxophone and Ryan Porter’s trombone parts, a key benefit of their long stint as collaborators. As Porter says of his connection with Washington, “Knowing somebody as a friend and then trading records, we have a lot of the

same references and gig experiences. We don’t have to do much talking. It’s more intuitive, as far as how we might interpret a line or phrase it. Once you’ve got two guys focused on the importance of that sound, the blend works.”

Porter notes that the connective thread in the coalition of players in Washington’s band, and the local scene itself, ends up informing the content of the material as well. “When Kamasi sat down and wrote for *The Epic*,” Porter says, “he had those guys in mind and [knew] what he wanted to do and how they would take certain parts. Once he put the music in front of us, it jelled so well, because we had such strong communication. Right now, we just want to communicate, so that we can have a conversation. Once we can focus on that as a whole, that’s when we just make magic.”

Obviously, that magic and a conveyance of energy to the crowd has led the band into some unexpected places and turned some heads toward the lure of jazz. At shows, says Coleman, “We go out and meet people and sign autographs and see what people are about. A lot of these people haven’t even heard of George Duke or Herbie Hancock, whereas we grew up on that. It’s like, ‘What is this?’ That is a big part of the appeal.”

Washington’s charismatic ability to introduce fans of rock and hip-hop to the world of jazz is one of the reasons he’s the hottest artist in jazz today. Another is the way that hardcore jazz fans see a deep connection between him and John Coltrane.

A funny thing happens when you experience *The Epic* in the manner intended, as a three-hour tour: A whole identity begins to emerge from the many parts, and you’re left wanting even more. It’s almost a subversive statement in the brevity-centric culture of our time.

DownBeat spoke with Washington during a break from his itinerant lifestyle, just before he was scheduled to take off to New Zealand and Hawaii—two places he had yet to visit.

You have experienced a whirlwind year. Does it feel like things are suddenly converging for you after years of effort and commitment to the creative life?

Yeah. It’s like being in a room with all these doors that have all been locked, and all of a sudden, they’re all open. I’m just walking around saying, “Oh, I guess I’ll go through here now and see what that’s like.”

I always felt like we had something to give, but we just didn’t have a chance to give it. I always felt that if we had an opportunity to play our music for people, it would speak to them. I could feel it from playing with other artists, and I could feel where people were at. It seemed like we were doing something that people were searching for.

It’s like the door is locked and you have

these big buckets of water, and you hear people saying, "I'm thirsty." You think, "I would give it to you, but I don't know how to get it to you." You run around to each door and try to open it up. Brainfeeder came along; that was the first door to open up. When that opened up, all the doors opened up, and we could go around saying, "Here's the water, here's the water."

Now we're thinking, "Where else do we want to go with this?" Maybe we'll put some ice in the water, or make some lemonade, something new and interesting.

I've been listening to *The Epic* as a whole, in sequence. Do you think that is the proper, ideal way to listen to the album?

Yeah, that's how I like to listen to it. When I finished it, I heard it several times from beginning to end. That's when you get the best experience, because things are inter-related. You can hear the connections, the styles and the musicians. ... You can break it up a little bit, but I think you get a clearer sense of what it is when you listen to it all the way through.

But everyone has different attention spans. I have a pretty long attention span. I can listen to music all day.

Each of the three discs in the set—"The Plan," "The Glorious Tale" and "The Historic Repetition"—has a different emphasis or point of view. On the third disc, you have the only cover material of the album—"Claire De Lune," "Cherokee" and Terence Blanchard's theme from *Malcolm X*—revisited in fresh ways. That opens up a new portal in the musical outlook, after being entirely in an original musical language prior to that. Was that the idea with those covers?

That whole hour is its own thing. The first part has songs I wrote a long time ago, during a time in my life when I was pushing towards something. The next album of songs I wrote while I was on the road, while I was playing with other people. You can kind of get the connection between where you're trying to get and where you end up being.

With the last part, I wanted to show the connection that we have with music that came before, with "Cherokee" and "Claire De Lune," two really old songs, and with "Malcolm's Theme." It's a bit of a time warp. I wanted to take songs and deal with them in a way that might show the connection between the past and the present. "Cherokee" is taken in a different direction, but it still sounds like "Cherokee." "Claire De Lune" sounds like this solemn, soulful kind of thing, but you can't always hear the original in the context of the solo piano.

I tried to pull on that connection that is inherent between what is being done in the past and in the present. Sometimes, you can look at it like they're separated, but they're really not.



Washington performs with bassist Myles Mosley (left) at the Okeechobee Music & Arts Festival on March 4.

ADAM MCCULLOUGH

I recently spoke with John Scofield, whose latest album is *Past Present*, and he talked about how, with music, you almost can't separate the past and the present, because what happens in memory—your own or a collective memory trust—continues to live on in the present. What you play or write in the present reflects on echoes from the past. It's a continuum.

Absolutely. But at the same time, there are new things going on. There are new experiences that people didn't have in the past, and there are old experiences in the past that we don't necessarily have now. Like taking a train tour. In the '30s or the '40s, people went on tour and were riding a train the whole time. In the past, people wouldn't have experienced the modern tour bus.

If you see a human skeleton, it's pretty hard to tell one from the next. Past, future, present, they all kind of look the same. But once you start adding the meat, the skin, the organs, the facial features, then you can see where they're from. In music, there are parts that are universal, that are the same as they were thousands of years ago. But there are other parts that weren't present 10 years ago.

On *The Epic*, there are parallels that arise. I hear the tenor-trombone blend and I think of Sonny Rollins. You also have a unique way of dealing with voices and strings, maybe with a nod to Sun Ra and models from the '60s and '70s.

For me, it didn't necessarily come from any one place. I'm a big fan of Max Roach, the *Freedom Now Suite* and *Percussion Bitter Sweet*, and Abbey Lincoln. There is stuff that Donald Byrd did with voices, and then there's *Symphony Of Psalms*, by Stravinsky. I also grew up playing in choirs, so that aspect of the music has also always been in there. It comes from

a lot of different places. That's true of most of the things in my music. There are a lot of connections between things, which people might not always see or expect—with Max Roach and Stravinsky, for instance. That's a pretty big block of culture that connects.

The album has an overall feel of a narrative through-line. Are there other precedents or examples of three-hour jazz albums? It's hard to think of any.

It's funny. When I made that decision and told Flying Lotus about it, it was hard to think of comparisons. You have Keith Jarrett's 10-LP set [*Sun Bear Concerts*], and John Coltrane's *The Complete 1961 Village Vanguard Recordings* or Miles Davis' *The Complete In A Silent Way Sessions*, all those reissues. I wasn't trying to sneak a fast one. I just told him the story and let him listen to the album in sequence. After I brought up those other examples of albums that did well, and were more than a single disc, he said, "We've got to do this."

You've said that you were led to accept the epic form via dreams that you had.

Sometimes, you don't know what you want, but a part of you does know. Dreams can inform that. I already knew what I wanted to do, but was kind of fighting it. I'm a comic book, anime kind of person anyway, so my having that story helped me find my groove. It definitely loosened me up to that idea. I knew, "This is it."

I'm weird. I'm very indecisive until I decide; but once I decide, it's hard for anyone to change my mind. We talked about staggering the releases and not putting them all out at once, but we thought, "No, this is one thing—it's not different things. It doesn't make sense to put them out separately."

You start the album with "Change Of The

Guard.” Does that title have significance, in terms of you wanting to change things up and introduce a new voice in the music?

I am really a second-generation musician. My dad and his friends were so good. I remember being a kid. I liked Lee Morgan and Wayne Shorter and Herbie, the generation before him. I always used to wonder why people like my dad, [drummer] Sonship Theus, [pianist] Horace Tapscott, [pianist] Nate Morgan and people like them weren't better known. They used to come to my house and play. I got a little older and realized how good they were.

["Change Of The Guard"] was a song I wrote a long time ago, when I was 19 years old. It was written for my dad, for the generation of musicians who didn't necessarily make albums or get out there in a way that people would really know about them. It was almost like a generation lost, that generation of guys who graduated from high school in the '70s.

The generation after them, with Wynton and those guys, got the spotlight. That's why I wrote "Change Of The Guard"—for that generation of musicians in L.A. Usually, the whole world sees this passing of the baton, but nothing like that happened here. All of us who grew up around them, we knew them and respected them.

Why do you think that was—just being in the wrong place, wrong time for that mode of jazz?

I think that was the beginning of a homogenization of music, if you think about music coming out of New York. New York is definitely the center of jazz, but people have been doing it in other places, too. You have the Art Farmers of the world who did it from somewhere else.

If you think about Los Angeles, in particular, that is when Hollywood really exploded, in the '70s. That's when the identity of L.A. became that. People thought, "Los Angeles? That's Hollywood." But the style of jazz in L.A. has often been avant-garde and not commercial like that, so it doesn't really match the stereotype. People's idea of Los Angeles is not that kind of music: dense, avant-garde, heavy music.

But that artistic strain has always been there.

It has always been there. People like Mingus, Dolphy and Ornette, and [others] from California in general. They were all from the deep end.

There's an aspect of L.A. jazz that isn't well-known beyond its borders, like Horace Tapscott's Pan-African Peoples Orchestra, which your band taps into, and Gerald Wilson's orchestra, which you were a member of. And there are so many others.

There is a huge scene, geographically. That whole area of Liemert Park and South Central L.A. is an older jazz scene, especially in the '90s.

Where else in L.A. could you go where there were four jazz clubs, poetry, a blues club and people playing in the park—all in a two-block area? Definitely, people like Horace Tapscott and Gerald Wilson, that whole dense scene—that is the sound.

When most people think of South Central L.A., they think of gangsta rap. That was a part of it. We heard that. That is in the music, as well, that aspect of life, for sure, but Liemert Park was a big part of it, too. That energy was not just the jazz clubs, but the people who lived there. There was a social consciousness and a great sense of community.

People embraced us when we played music. They'd get mad at us if we played too loud, too fast, too long, but still they loved the fact that we were there. Billy Higgins was always encouraging us and Horace Tapscott was encouraging us.

Regarding your work on *To Pimp A Butterfly*, the way it fuses hip-hop with jazz breaks new ground and is done so fluidly. That's vastly different than *The Epic*, where you are dealing with very different musical issues.

Hip-hop and jazz have a more entangled history than some people think. At one point, hip-hop was dealing with jazz in terms of jazz samples of older records. The thing with *Butterfly* is that it is fused with jazz, but [with] new jazz musicians playing on the record. It's not samples at all, but people actually playing. That's what's really different about it.

Where do you go from here? You were talking before about having so many open doors and possibilities.

Yeah, the funny part is that we did [*The Epic*] in 2011. And a lot of those songs are older than that. For me, I'm looking forward to getting back to where we were. And since we've been touring, we've been writing new tunes and had new ideas of what we can do. I want to move along to different approaches to writing and harmony. I have all these songs now. I want to record them.

What's next is where we are now. It's kind of simple: You always just do what you're doing, and not do anything else.

I'm writing out a story that I did. That's one of those things with doors opening up. I've had a lot of stories that come to me over my life. This story, I want to write it out maybe like a graphic novel and put it out there.

There is other music that was recorded when I was recording mine. I want to help those guys find a place and a vehicle to get it out to the world. Miles Mosley is putting out one of his songs in April. [Pianist] Cameron Graves is close to putting out his stuff. Terrace Martin is putting out his record in April. There is all this music right there on the dock, waiting to get out there. **DB**

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