

# The inner bass player

## Dave Holland goes solo at the Maverick



PHOTO BY DREW GOREN

*Dave smiles...*

The first the American public heard of Dave Holland was when Miles Davis hired him at the age of 21 to play in his famous Quintet. "How about that Dave?" Miles said happily to jazz writer Leonard Feather shortly thereafter. "Ain't he a bitch?" That was in 1968, nearly 40 years ago, and Holland has stayed aloft in the jazz stratosphere ever since. Local residents can hear why for themselves Saturday, July 29 when he plays a solo concert at 8 p.m. at Maverick Concert Hall.

As composer, bandleader, and performer, Holland today melds not only traditional jazz, but such influences as free jazz, odd meters common to countries like Turkey or Greece, folk melodies, and hints of old masters from Béla Bartók to Duke Ellington. In 2005 he was named Musician of the Year at the 9th Annual Jazz Journalist Awards; earlier this year, he received his third Grammy award, this one for his big band record *Overtime*.

Holland was at home in Saugerties for this interview, a rare thing given that he tours so often and on so many continents. He spoke in

what presumably was a hybrid English-American accent, choosing his words easily yet carefully. At one point he confessed he doesn't like to explain too much about what he does: "Music always expresses it better."

*You're going to be playing solo at the Maverick. Is that something you've done often?*

Anthony Braxton was probably the first person who encouraged me to play an extended solo piece, around 1970 or so. I thought about it, and realized it had a whole other set of challenges and musical possibilities. Finally I did a solo album in 1977 called *Emerald Tears*. That's been the first so far of two solo albums on the bass.

*What would you like to say about the program you've selected for this concert?*

It's going to be a surprise not only for the public, but for me. I've been going through a fairly extensive list of compositions, seeing which ones feel like they'll be interesting to play in a week's

time. The day of the concert, I'll go to the theater and do a sound check. By then I'll have some pieces in mind which I'll probably play that night. But during the concert, there may be something which just feels right — maybe because of what's preceded it, maybe because of the feeling in the theater. And that's what I'll call for the next piece. The moment takes over.

*You say the feeling in the theater influences you. How do you sense that feeling?*

It's the emotion in the room. We're talking now about things that are very hard to put into words. It's like when you're with a good friend, and you're talking about something, and there's a feeling between you of sharing, or of love. You can't say you observed it because of a facial expression, necessarily; it's something you feel with all your senses.

*So things happen that are unexpected?*

Absolutely. The public can sense when there's discovery going on, not just someone running through licks and routines. It adds an element of excitement, of danger: Is it going to work out? Where's it going to go?

*We're talking about the courage to risk failure — to flub a note or draw a blank, in front of the entire audience.*

What is creativity without that risk? It's not only through your successes that you learn, but through your failures, too. The experienced artist is able to use their experience to make failure into a success.

*Did you ever watch Johnny Carson? He would tell a joke, it would fall flat —*

Yes!

*— and somehow it would be funny.*

Exactly. There's a very good book called *The Inner Game of Tennis*, the theme of which was repeated in various other books, including one written by a bass player. And that was this: in order to function at maximum capability, you have to allow yourself to do it. You must remove the blocks, the questioning, the doubt: "Am I going to get the ball across the net, or not?" If you think like that, you won't.

*What's the longest vacation you've ever taken from music?*

I'm in it right now. For the first summer probably in 20, 24 years, I made a decision to not be touring this summer. I took a number of weeks really off, to clear my mind, spend some time with the family. There's a lot of things you get half-started when you're in a lifestyle like we have — you come home for a week or two weeks, you get something started and then you can't finish it. This summer I've read three books already from cover to cover without having to stop. And I just had a vacation

with my wife, which we hadn't done for many years, and I didn't take the bass with me, or any instrument. And that's a first. It felt fantastic. I think it's a new stage for me, where I feel confident that I can walk away from the music for a period of time and come back to it, and it'll still be there.

*How old are you now?*

I'm going to be 60 this year.

*That's a milestone.*

Yeah. And I feel a renewed energy from the break. It's shown me that sometimes the best thing you can do for the music is step back for a moment and take a breath.

*Had you been getting jaded? That happens with so many non-musicians as we grow older — we stop listening to new things and stick with the familiar.*

I'm glad to say I don't feel jaded. There's constantly new things being done, and not just with jazz or classical music, but popular music, music from different parts of the world. I've been listen-

ing to some south Indian percussion music with extremely complex rhythm structures — it's just fascinating to me how people can play so freely in those structures. And then Missy Elliott, and hip-hop, and the other new music coming out of the black culture. Some of it is extremely creative.

*What is the most important non-musical skill for you?*

Getting along with people. Not only with great musicians, but musicians maybe not of that caliber, to make the best music you can with them. And as a band leader and composer, to reach out to the

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musicians you work with, ask for their input and their participation. You get something more than you could have ever imagined on your own.

*You probably know that modern classical music has been criticized as going beyond the reach of popular taste. Is there a similar dilemma in modern jazz, given that it can be so technical and complex?*

With classical music, they've been programming the same symphonies for years in an attempt to remain popular. But it hasn't brought the audience along with the music. There are many contemporary classical composers that are very accessible, and yet without sacrificing the integrity of their music. That's

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the challenge we face as artists, because to be obscure for the sake of it isn't a good thing for anybody. Yet at the same time, I would never question the right of an artist to pursue their vision without compromise. If they want to make music that only one or two people enjoy, that's their prerogative.

The example I've always thought of is Coltrane. In the early 1970s for a while, I was with

Stan Getz, and we were playing in Baltimore at a place called the Left Bank Jazz Society. It was in a big ballroom. They used to sell set-ups — you'd bring your own bottle, and they'd sell ginger ale and stuff like that. It was a very nice event. And Coltrane had played a concert there in the late 1960s, and somebody there told me about it.

Trane had just had this huge hit with "My Favorite Things," and now he'd been booked into the Left Bank. There were people around the block waiting to come in. He had Jimmy Garrison, Rashied Ali, Alice Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders — oh, and Donald Garrett on bass clarinet. Well, within about 10 minutes the

place emptied. People had come wanting to hear "Favorite Things," and instead Trane and his group were playing music that was very exploratory and free — whatever he was working on at the time. When I heard this story, I thought, "Wow!" To have won an audience — and then to have the courage to keep your search going, to be unrelenting. This to me is what being an artist is about.

*It's interesting that you say that, because you don't have the persona of a revolutionary...*

I don't feel that I am.

*The popular notion of an artist is as tragic, even self-destructive. And you've postulated that instead an artist can be healthy, can lead a rounded life. When we think of Coltrane, he had some real hardships...*

And I have, too! It hasn't been a smooth ride, you know? But the hardships were welcome. Some of the happiest times have been when my family and I felt this strong commitment to what we were doing together, and said "No" to the job that was being offered because it wasn't the right job.

*If you had to come back in the next life as other than a musician, what would you choose?*

I'll take whatever's given me. That's what life's about, working with what you're given. Faith has a place, but it's also what you do with your faith. I don't know what's beyond the gate, and I don't think any of us do for sure. I know there's a connection to the universe that we all have, and I'm just trying to fulfill my place here the best I can, and learn about how to do that along the way. ++

Randy Burgess

*Dave Holland will perform solo at 8 p.m., Saturday, July 29, at the Maverick Concert Hall. Admission is \$20. Tickets are available at the door an hour before the performance. Directions and information are available at [maverickconcerts.org](http://maverickconcerts.org) or by calling 679-8217.*