

# WARM DADDY :

Wess  
Anderson  
warms your  
heart  
with his  
music

*By Dean M. Shapiro*

PHOTO COURTESY OF WESS ANDERSON

When Wess Anderson was in his early teens he received a very important lesson from a very important jazz musician.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WESS ANDERSON

It was in his Brooklyn neighborhood in New York City in 1979 when legendary alto saxophonist, Sonny Stitt, who has often been compared to Charlie Parker, was doing a gig in a local club. He asked Wess's father, Wess Anderson Sr., to sit in with him on drums and young Wess Jr. was invited to tag along, bringing his own alto sax with him.

"When I took my instrument out of the case, Sonny said to me, 'Whatcha gonna do with that?' and I told him, 'I'm gonna sit in with you,'" Wess laughingly recalled. "My daddy was horrified. He told me, 'No, don't do that. You're out of your mind and you're about to find out something.'"

However, Stitt humored the brash young man and asked him what he wanted to play and Wess suggested Charlie Parker's "Cherokee," a jazz classic. "And, man, he played it so fast I thought my neck had

broke. He cut my throat," Wess continued. "I thought to myself 'Do I really want to play this thing?'"

After a subpar performance, Wess started to pack up his horn and Stitt stopped him, telling him, "No, you're gonna finish the set with me and then you're gonna come to my dressing room and we're gonna practice and I'll show you why you sounded so sad." Dreading the lesson to come, Wess nonetheless went along with it and learned some valuable techniques from the master. He was invited to stay for the second set, which he did. "If you really wanna play jazz this is what you gotta do," Stitt emphasized to him.

"So then after I got back home and had some time to seriously think about it, I asked myself, 'Do I want to do this?' And I decided that, yes, I did," Wess said. "That gig really did it for me. So from then on I just started playing and I've been doing it ever since."

Growing up in a musical household gave Wessell "Warmdaddy" Anderson Jr. a leg up on others his age who also went into the music scene.

His father performed a regular weekend gig with renowned baritone saxophonist and fellow Brooklyn-ite, Cecil Payne, and Wess Jr. frequently joined them.

"Cecil would be showing me all those Charlie Parker tunes and we played them together," Wess fondly recalled. "He was on baritone and I was on alto so we were both in the same key. It was really nice."

Given such an illustrious introduction to

the jazz musical genre, it was only natural that this immensely talented, gregarious young man would emerge as one of the foremost alto saxophonists of the present day. He has toured the world ("I've been everywhere but Africa and Cuba"), recorded five CDs with his own bands and three others as a sideman (with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and pianist Marcus Roberts) and taught his unique techniques to students at the prestigious Juilliard School, Michigan State University and, presently, in the Music Department at Loyola University of New Orleans.

Now a fulltime New Orleans resident, Wess's move to Louisiana in the mid-1980s came about through a local connection: fellow saxophonist Branford Marsalis. Wess had met and played with Marsalis and his brother Wynton while still in New York City and Branford convinced Wess to enroll at Southern University in Baton Rouge to study under Branford's former mentor, the influential late clarinetist and music professor, Alvin Batiste.

"He was one of the greatest influences



Desi and Wess Anderson

PHOTO BY PAT JOLLY

on me,” Wess noted, in reference to Batiste. “One of the most unusual musicians I’ve ever been around. He played clarinet like (saxophonists) John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley. When I first came down from New York he was practicing Coltrane’s ‘Giant Steps.’ I asked him, ‘Why do you play clarinet like that’ and he said, ‘Why not?’” And that’s how he taught us. He’d take familiar tunes and put them in different environments so you can learn them more easily.”

Then in 1988 Wynton Marsalis arrived on campus to hold a workshop at Southern and he took Wess back to New York with him to join his septet, as well as perform with Wynton’s Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. It turned out to be a 20-year stint that Wess described as “twenty glorious years touring all around the world.”

It was during his early years with Marsalis that Wess acquired his colorfully descriptive nickname. As he explained, “We were playing in Chicago and after our gig I was packing up my horn and there was a man in the audience with his granddaughter and grandson who wanted Wynton’s autograph so I offered to bring them. When I brought them down, Wynton already had a line of people who wanted autographs. So Wynton’s drummer, Herlin Riley, saw me and said, ‘Man, that’s like a warm father. That was so nice of you.’ And Wynton looked up and said, ‘Warmdaddy.’ That’s how I got it.”

Stylistically, Wess is as versatile as whatever the occasion calls for. Depending on the audience, the venue and the event, he moves effortlessly through the jazz and blues canon, from traditional to straight-ahead to smooth jazz and everything in between. Slowed down somewhat by a series of strokes in the early 2010s, he remained determined to overcome and persevere and continue what he knows and loves best: performing his music and



PHOTO COURTESY OF WESS ANDERSON

entertaining his many fans.

“I had to re-teach myself how to play the saxophone again,” Wess said. “I was paralyzed for a year in 2012. So I had to come back and teach myself again. I knew how to play but I just couldn’t move my right hand. Now I can. It’s not as fast as the left hand but you can’t tell unless I tell you. I don’t play those real fast tempos anymore but I can still play.”

Continuing, Wess commented on how he teaches his students to deal with a disability; whether temporary or permanent. “I told them, ‘If you want to play, use your mind. Even if you are paralyzed, work around it. If you can’t actually use your hands you just start singing. If the music is in you it will come out one way or the other.’”

Discussing the present, Wess said he is slowly starting to get performances lined up again, starting with outdoor events and gradually moving to indoor venues as the COVID-19 situation and its restrictions start to lift. He is especially hopeful of getting back into his once-regular gigs at Snug Harbor on Frenchmen Street where he played to packed houses in the early 2000s and was one of the club’s most popular draws. When his live shows there sold out, patrons could sit at the club’s bar and watch him perform on the

closed-circuit monitor screens.

He is also checking to see if there’s an available slot for him and the rest of his quartet at this year’s JazzFest, scheduled for October if the pandemic is sufficiently under control.

Happily married to his wife, Desi, and recently moved into a house in the Garden District, Wess has made sure that the music which is so much a part of his heritage will remain in the family for possibly another generation or two. His son, Wessell Anderson III, is a talented trombone player who also plays bass and tuba for second line parades and other events. His two young granddaughters are showing an interest in music as well.

“So the city’s opening up now,” Wess noted as the interview came toward the end. “I teach my students that we’re in the 21st century. You’ve got to be able to play anything and everything. Especially here in New Orleans. You’ve got to be ready and know how and when to play. When somebody says, ‘You got it, man,’ that means you got it. Start playing!”

*Follow Wess Anderson on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=wessell%20anderson> and look for his CDs in local record stores.*