

SAX LEGEND MACEO PARKER JOINS WDR BIG BAND IN HEADS UP DEBUT

***Roots & Grooves* celebrates the music of Ray Charles and digs deep into the soul/funk groove**

While James Brown is generally credited with redefining and re-energizing R&B and soul music in the 1960s, turning that revolutionary vision into a reality would not have been possible without the help of his creative collaborator, stage foil and right-hand man, saxophonist Maceo Parker. Like no other sax player before him, Parker stretched the potential of his instrument to unprecedented limits, exhibiting an uncanny ability to alternate the saxophone from a melodic instrument to a percussive one, and then back again, in the span of just a couple of beats, often less.

Four decades later, after recurring stints with Brown and funk titans George Clinton and Bootsy Collins in the '70s, and a solo career that has propelled him through the '80s and '90s, Parker's skills are just as tight and precise as they were during those highly charged early days, and his creative audacity is equally undiminished.

For perhaps the first time, the breadth and scope of Parker's musical prowess is fully realized in a new recording that positions him front and center in a fully orchestrated setting. *Roots & Grooves* (HUCD 3134), a two-disc set scheduled for release on Heads Up International on February 12, 2008, unites this brilliant sax innovator with Germany's renowned WDR Big Band. The album is both a tribute to R&B/soul legend Ray Charles and a showcase for Parker's own fiery hybrid of R&B, soul and funk.

"I run out of words when I try to describe exactly how good and kid-like this project made me feel," says Parker, who counts Charles among his earliest and most important influences. "I'm playing the same saxophone I always play, but it was like a whole new adventure for me to play with a big band. And it's very rewarding to get the kind of feedback I've been getting from people about this project. We started with a blank sheet and we ended up with this whole big wonderful thing."

On the first disc, Parker and the band move expertly through lush orchestrations of Ray Charles classics like "What'd I Say," "Hit the Road Jack," "I'm Busted" and "Hallelujah, I Love Her So." Parker's vocals on these tracks uncannily resemble those of Charles, particularly on the ballads like "You Don't Know Me" and "Georgia On My Mind."

"I got into Ray at a very early age," Parker explains. "I'd listen to him sing and I'd try to equate that with playing the saxophone... That was the goal. I was only 16 or 17 years old, trying to come up with that kind of concept, and it was just from listening to Ray Charles. So he's always been the cat for me."

As far as WDR director and arranger Michael Abene is concerned, Parker's early affinity for Charles' overall style paid off – not just on the instrumental side, but on the vocal side as well. “If you close your eyes, it sounds just like Ray,” he says of the first half of *Roots & Grooves*. “I didn't realize the depth of it until we got together for rehearsals. I knew his playing, but when he started to sing it just knocked me out. I think people are going to be amazed by his singing.”

The second disc ratchets up the funk quotient by aligning Parker with the air-tight rhythm section of bassist Rodney “Skeet” Curtis (formerly of Parliament-Funkadelic and currently with Maceo's own band for nearly a decade) and drummer Dennis Chambers (another P-Funk alum, currently with Santana and armed with a resume that includes jazz collaborations with a host of artists). This second set shifts away from the classic Ray Charles repertoire and plunges into big band arrangements of some well known Parker originals: “Off the Hook,” “Uptown Up,” “Shake Everything You Got,” and the early '70s funk anthem, “Pass the Peas.”

Throughout both sets, numerous WDR soloists step up to the plate and deliver the goods. Among them are guitarist Paul Shigihara (“I'm Busted”), alto saxophonists Heiner Wiberny (“Them That's Got”) and Karolina Strassmeyer (“To Be Or Not To Be”), and tenor saxophonists Olivier Peters (“What'd I Say”) and Paul Heller (“Hit the Road Jack”).

Parker calls *Roots & Grooves* “a dream come true” in more ways than one. The album not only serves as his opportunity to pay tribute to an revered mentor, but also illustrates how those early influences laid the groundwork for the funk sound and sensibility that Parker himself helped spawn. “As soon as I started hearing rumors that perhaps I could do some kind of big band project, my brain raced right to the Ray Charles stuff that I knew, because I've always wanted to do that. And to hear those funk tunes blown up to big band proportions is really something else!”

That sense of unhampered enthusiasm makes its way into every note of this R&B-drenched, funk-fueled collaboration. Catch a saxophone legend alongside one of the greatest big bands on either side of the Atlantic. Dig the roots, ride the groove.