

The Yellowjackets' Marcus Baylor



Buzz and Groove

AFTER SEVEN YEARS DRUMMING WITH the Yellowjackets, Marcus Baylor is still the group's newcomer. But he makes no apologies for not being a founding member of the long-running jazz combo. "I think I was three years old when they started in 1979," he observes.

The notion of three-year-old Marcus pounding skins for a grown-up group isn't as absurd as it sounds. At that age, Marcus had already acquired a year of drumming experience.



"I grew up in the Pentecostal Apostolic church my mom and dad founded in St. Louis," says Baylor. "It was a very musical church, and I played in services, for the choir, for different programs from age two on. It taught me how to be a good accompanist and pick up on a groove."

The Baylors didn't allow secular music in the house, so Marcus's early drum influences were strictly gospel players, particularly Michael Williams, who played with Commissioned. But somehow, other influences eventually crept in. "Now, I don't encourage anybody to sneak or anything," chuckles Baylor, "but I used to like playing the Yellowjackets' *Live Wires* album—the one where they do 'Revelation' with Take Six."

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By middle school, Marcus had developed a taste for jazz, and by high school, his course was set. "A young musician friend took me to my first jazz club," he remembers. "They were jamming on some burning, up-tempo song—'Cherokee,' maybe. I thought, 'Now *that* is what I want to do!'"

Baylor became infatuated with the drum virtuosity of fellow St. Louis native Dave Weckl—and, as a result, with Yamaha drums. "As a kid, I had Yamaha posters on my wall," he says. "I've wanted to play Yamaha drums all my life! So it's a blessing that I can now be part of the family. But at the time, what Dave was doing was too high-level for me. I didn't know about standards, rhythm changes, or anything like that. I needed a foundation." To help him build that foundation, some older jazz buddies stepped in, introducing Baylor to the canonic work of Jimmy Cobb, Philly Joe Jones, Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, and Tony Williams.

There was no doubt that Marcus would pursue music in college. "I'm the youngest of nine children," he explains, "and my mom and dad put eight of us through college. Anything else wasn't an option."

Baylor won a scholarship to New York's New School, where he studied piano and music theory, as well as drumming. "That gave me more insight into what goes on in a composition," he notes. "When you understand the feeling of a major chord, a minor chord, or a dominant, those chords start creating emotion in your playing. It changes what you feel about a composition."

After graduation, Marcus scored gigs with saxophonist Kenny Garrett and vocalist Cassandra Wilson. Wilson helped change how he thought about music, he says: "At the time, I was all about hearing the groove, but she'd think in terms of textures. She might use an analogy like, 'I'm hearing this as green,' or 'I hear this as flowers.' I started to realize you don't always want a lot of cymbals or a loud roll. Maybe you should just brush soft quarter-notes on the crash."

When the Yellowjackets' second drummer, William Kennedy, left the group in 1999, Marcus was one of several players who shared the chair. Soon he occupied it full-time, playing some of the same tunes he'd enjoyed as a child.

Baylor's current kit is a Yamaha Absolute Maple with 10", 12", 14", and 16" toms, a 20" kick, and an 14" x 7" Elvin Jones snare. "I also have a second snare—a custom piccolo—and an 8" tom over on my left, above the piccolo," he reports.

Marcus also enjoys playing Yamaha's Oak Custom kit. "All Yamaha drums really sing," he says. "That means I can play anything, from straight-ahead jazz to gospel to rock, just by retuning them. They're so versatile!"

Since getting off the road in support of the Yellowjackets' *Twenty Five*, Marcus has been pursuing several other projects. He and his wife, Jean Baylor (formerly Jean Norris of the R&B group Zhané), recently co-produced her solo album *Testimony: My Life Story* (available at www.dajams.com). And the Yellowjackets recently recorded *Lifecycle*, a collaboration with jazz guitar giant Mike Stern.

Marcus finds it easy to shift gears that way. "I don't hear music as 'jazz' or 'funk' or 'gospel.' If you hear music as a style, that puts you in a box that doesn't allow you to be creative. But if you simply learn when to feel, when to open up, your creative options are great. That's the blessing of growing up the way I did."