

in his own words... George Fludas

Chicago drummer George Fludas was born in Chicago on October 10, 1966. He was inspired to play drums by his father, who was also a drummer, and who exposed him to great jazz drummers such as Art Blakey, Max Roach, and "Philly" Joe Jones. He attended Lane Tech High School where he majored in music and played percussion in their concert band and orchestra. After briefly attending Roosevelt University's music school in 1985-86, he began freelancing with Chicago greats Von Freeman, Jodie Christian and Lin Halliday, as well as playing in groups with guitarist Bobby Broom, and saxophonists Ron Blake and Eric Alexander. He has subsequently played with many stellar musicians such as Ira Sullivan, Buddy Montgomery, Lou Donaldson, Frank Wess, Kenny Burrell, Betty Carter, Johnny Griffin, Roy Hargrove, Tommy Flanagan, Hank Jones, Cedar Walton, Diana Krall, Benny Carter, Phil Woods, Junior Cook, Slide Hampton, Jesse Davis and Benny Green.

Fludas has performed at numerous jazz venues in the U.S. such as the Jazz Showcase in Chicago, Yoshi's in Oakland, the Blue Note, Village Vanguard, Smoke and the Jazz Standard in New York and Catalina's in Hollywood, as well as many international jazz festivals, including Montreal Festival du Jazz, Bern Jazz Fest in Switzerland, Glasgow and Edinburgh Jazz Fests, Vitoria Jazz Fest, San Sebastian Fest in Spain and the USS Norway Jazz Cruise. He toured Europe and Japan extensively as a member of Ray Brown's Trio, and with groups led by Hank Jones, Diana Krall, Monty Alexander, Cedar Walton and Joey DeFrancesco. Fludas lives in Chicago with his wife and two sons and performs regularly with local artists and visiting headliners at the Jazz Showcase, Andy's Jazz Club and The Green Mill. He can be heard on numerous CDs as a sideman with Ray Brown, Eric Alexander, Monty Alexander, Kyle Asche, Geof Bradfield, Scott Burns, Bobby Broom, Lin Halliday and the Chicago Jazz Orchestra.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: You are a born and bred Chicagoan. Wasn't your father a drummer?

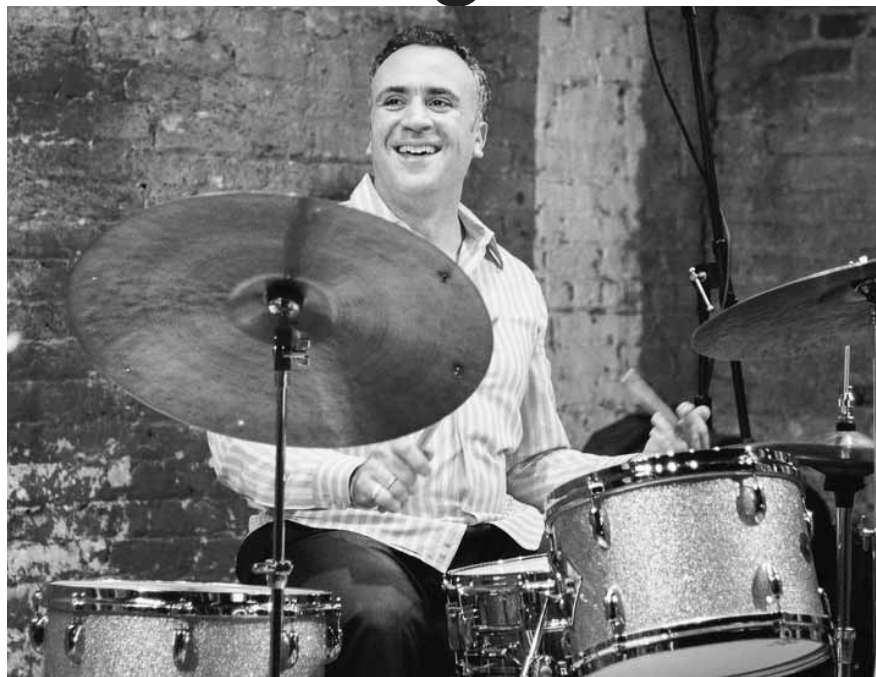
George Fludas: Yes, but for him it wasn't a profession. He got into jazz when he was a teenager. He was self-taught, although he did take some lessons from Walter Perkins, a great drummer from the South Side, who had the group MJT Plus Three and also played with Ahmad Jamal's trio. My dad had a great passion for jazz and a natural ear, not just with rhythms and drumming, but melody too. He didn't play piano or any melodic instrument, but I remember him scatting or whistling melodies and solos and stuff. He just had that natural affinity for it. He started to go to the clubs and sitting in when he was a teenager. In those days, they were more lenient—you could be eighteen and finagle your way in, and of course Joe Segal held the Roosevelt jazz sessions, which he told me about. He saw a lot of great people that I later had the great fortune of playing with, like Lin Halliday, John Young, Ira Sullivan, Jodie Christian. He also told me very detailed stories about seeing Miles, Coltrane, Monk, Max Roach and Blakey. Unfortunately, there was a lot of drug use on the jazz scene at that time and he struggled with it. He stopped hanging out and sitting in by the time he was twenty-two.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Did that fear extend to you and your career?

Fludas: A bit, though I wouldn't call it fear. I would say it made me aware and I never inclined towards using drugs, for sure because of his experience. He talked very openly about it with me when I was very young.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: He exposed you to a wide variety of music. Was he still listening to jazz at the time?

Fludas: Oh yeah, mostly jazz but lots of good music was always playing at my house, as long as I can remember. From the time I was born, I heard great jazz, classical, flamenco, rock and salsa. My mom is from Puerto Rico and he took a liking to salsa as well. They met in the Humboldt Park neighborhood in 1964. In addition to jazz, I heard a lot of classical, Latin music, good funk, good R&B, good soul music, and classic rock. He was into all of that too. So, by the time I was four or five, I became in-



George Fludas performing at Chris Anderson's Jazz Record Art Collective. Photo by Harvey Tillis

terested in the drums. We went to Drums Unlimited, which was the famous drum shop downtown on Wabash. My dad ordered a new Gretsch kit, and got it delivered. I was so excited. We were a bit low on cash back then and my aunt Jackie, who also loved good music, lent him the money to buy the kit. Thank you Jackie! My dad talked about drumming all the time with me. I have memories of him putting a record jacket on a chair and playing with brushes, before we got the drums. He would show me with the brushes how to play a basic beat. I took to it right away and he saw that and encouraged it. All through my single-digit years I would play along to records and he would put on albums that would be easier to hear what was happening, like Ahmad Jamal, or Bud Powell—not that it was simple music, but you can hear the beat clearly. Errol Garner as well—I learned how to play brushes mainly by listening to Chico Hamilton LPs, Errol Garner's *Concert by the Sea*, and Ahmad Jamal's *But Not For Me*. And I got into Art Blakey because of the dramatic sound. I loved that! The two main things that I was into as a ten-year-old were baseball and jazz drums! I had pictures from *DownBeat* of Blakey and Max Roach on my wall, and then I had Rick Monday and Jose Cardenal there, too. I remember going shopping with him for records when I was around seven. He picked out a whole bunch of rock records, and I was fascinated by the covers—Jethro Tull, Zeppelin and Genesis. He was curious and had a great ear, and I think he always appreciated when music had a good feel.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: It's interesting how all of those music elements came together at an early age and informed your musical tastes and playing.

Fludas: Well, the main thing was, it was always very organic—it wasn't, *you are going to go take these lessons*, which I suppose is more typical way to get a kid started on an instrument. For me, the drums were like another toy in the house and I played with them, then I would play with my other toys, then I would go back and play with the drums. Music was on all day long. There was Chico Hamilton or Miles or Basie's band or Duke. Whatever it was, something good was playing so I tried to emulate what I heard, and it was fun. It was second nature; it wasn't something I had to figure out or study, like an assignment.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: That exposure to multiple styles seems to have benefited you. You are able to adapt instantly to the players around you.

Fludas: That's a very nice compliment. That's something I'm still trying to do, to be versatile and complementary to the bandleader. I work almost exclusively as a sideman, but at the same time hope that I am offering something distinctive or that has some mark of my own personality. I think that's what a good jazz drummer should aspire to: being supportive, but contributing something unique. For a long time I didn't feel like I had anything original to contribute. I wanted to do a really good job, but I knew, I'm no Billy Higgins or Philly Joe Jones. I remember the very first time that I played with Cedar Walton, I thought to myself: *What am I doing here? This is where Billy Higgins was!* But I calmed down and eventually let my personality flow.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: One of the least appreciated awards is Best Supporting Actor. It's not as glamorous as the Best Actor Oscar, yet the supporting role is perhaps more crucial as it can elevate the performances of the other actors. You are chameleon-like in that you can step into a music situation and elevate it, even if there is no "George Fludas Style."

Fludas: I hope I have some recognizable style! That's interesting; a very good point, and very astute. I've never really talked to anyone about this, but I think that is part of the insecurity that I have. If you are a fairly sentient person you are going question yourself. As a performer I often think, *Do people really like this? Do they like what I'm doing?* I'm trying to be versatile, but some guys are just so distinctive, what you see is what you get; it's one color and it's coming right down the pipe, take it or leave it. One of my heroes, Elvin Jones, was like this monstrous mountain—this force of nature that builds up. His playing was a really distinctive and solid thing, completely recognizable in the shape and form—the way he played, his sound, everything. He was really versatile in that he could play with so many different types of musicians, but it was Elvin all the way. I wish I had some of that!

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Some of the old movie actors—John Wayne, Cary Grant, Paul Newman—no matter the role, they were always the same. The later actors, like Brando and early DeNiro,

changed their personalities completely to fit the role they were playing.

Fludas: Like the Method School—Gene Hackman, Pacino, Robert Duvall, Brando—those guys, they are chameleons. They can change accents and do whatever it takes to become that role. I guess I am that "method" style of drummer. That's interesting, I'm actually learning—this is good! I'm forty-eight. I'm not all of a sudden going to be that *one* person, take it or leave it. I'm not superstitious at all, but I am a Libra. The stereotype is that they are balanced—they like harmony and they like to please both sides in an argument. I do have that in my personality and I think it shows in my musical approach. I aim to please, but I also want to be exciting. I want to fire it up. I love playing the drums and I love the sound of them so much that I love to get a full sound, so I hit them hard. All my favorite drummers hit them hard. First and foremost for me is a drummer's sound. It's their voice. You can't mistake Max's sound, Jimmy Cobb's sound. Art Taylor had one of my favorite drum sounds. Art's on so many records, he is the most recorded guy on Prestige Records. Philly Joe! End of story! The dynamics the greats used were always so important. I've tried to be conscious of that. I've gotten compliments from other musicians: *Man, you play so quiet, but you keep it so interesting*. But I've also heard, *Wow, you were playing loud!* I've played with great musicians, like Tommy Flanagan, Johnny Griffin, and they never told me I was playing too loud. I dunno, some people just don't like the heat. Still, I aim to please.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Blakey's another one that can explode.

Fludas: Indeed! He's one of my favorite and biggest influences. I loved Blakey, and I loved that Latin rhythm he did, so I tried to learn it back then. I got to meet Blakey when I was eight, and I was petrified. My dad took me to see him at the Jazz Showcase on Rush Street. I remember feeling his bass drum and it was like a kick in the chest. It almost made me scared—incredible! And that snare drum roll was a like a lion's roar. On the break my dad went up to Blakey and says, "My son plays drums and loves you. He listens to your records." So Blakey says, "Oh really? You want to go up and play?" I was way too nervous and said, "No, no!" So he laughed, pulled out a used pair of sticks from his stick bag and was about to hand them to me, but then he



Art Blakey and Fludas at Bradley's in New York, 1989.

said, "Hold on—let me give you a new pair." And I remember thinking, *I want the used ones with the notches!* But I had those sticks for a long time until I was playing and broke one, stupidly. My dad took me to hear many great players, like Buddy Rich, Blakey and Max Roach and I loved listening to the records. By the time I was twelve years old I knew way more about jazz than rock or pop music. Confession: I liked Kiss in seventh grade and was in the Kiss Army. [laughs] But, by eighth grade I got into the music my friends were into, which was basically hard rock—Led Zeppelin, Rush, AC/DC, Deep Purple. Actually, my dad took me to see the Led Zeppelin live movie, *The Song Remains the Same* when I was twelve. We saw the movie at the Carnegie Theatre and I will never forget the impression it had on me. John Bonham's sound and feel mesmerized me. The song that really got me was "No Quarter." It's got the Fender Rhodes, it has sort of a jazz feel, because the chords are more complex, and then it has this extended guitar solo. I was so taken by that when we got home I needed to find the record with the song "No Quarter" on it! *Houses of the Holy*. That's when I got into rock music. I was still into jazz—I was still playing along with "Night in Tunisia" and learning jazz tunes, but I really wanted to play rock.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: It's interesting that your dad saw your musical shift and did what he could to facilitate your exposure to live rock music, just as he had done with jazz.

Fludas: Yes, it was 1980, and I was just entering Lane Tech as an engineering drafting major; if you can believe that, and I found out that Led Zeppelin was going to come to the Chicago Stadium in November. I asked him if I could go and he said sure. So I filled out the form to get tickets—I sent it in at six in the morning, so the tickets would be in the first round. And then I got to school and this kid next to me says, "Hey, did you hear that the drummer from Led Zeppelin died?" I said, "You don't know what you are talking about, man." And he said, "No, man, it was on the radio this morning—he died of alcohol or an over-

dose." So that was a big blow. He was my favorite. I ended up going to many rock concerts in high school, and my dad never discouraged me or acted like a jazz snob. My first was Ozzy Osbourne's *Blizzard of Oz* tour with Randy Rhoads at the Aragon Ballroom! I saw Rush, Genesis, Bowie, The Police. I used to obsessively learn and practice Zeppelin and Rush tunes. I think it was actually great practice for my ears. It's funny now, but I learned every Zeppelin song more meticulously than I ever learned any jazz music. I read Dana Hall's interview [Chicago Jazz Magazine, May/June 2015], which I really enjoyed. There was a part in there where he said he learned Rush songs note for note. I was talking with him one day and said, "We were both probably working on the same riffs at the same time!" So we had a laugh over that. Anyway, my dad was cool, and supportive. He tolerated all that loud noise from the basement! My whole family did. They were great.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: It's a different mindset, musically. In most rock bands, the object is to play the music as close to the original as possible; in jazz, the object is to put your own stamp on the music.

Fludas: I suppose so, but my favorite rock drummers had that looseness too, and definitely put their own stamp on the music. Later on, I discovered great soul and R&B drummers like Bernard Purdie, Al Jackson Jr., Roger Hawkins, James Gadson. All these cats have that distinctive touch, sound and feel that I love. The genre doesn't matter to me. If it sounds good, it is good!

Chicago Jazz Magazine: How did you make the change from engineering drafting to music at Lane?

Fludas: I went up to talk to the band director, whose name was Maurice Golden. He was an old school, authoritative band director type, but a great teacher and person. I told him I had chosen the wrong major and I wanted to be in the music department. He asked me if I was a percussionist or was a "dumber"? [laughs] He said a dumber only plays the drums, but a percussionist plays percussion. I said percus-



John Webber, Fludas and bassist Dennis Irwin at Bradley's in June, 1989.

sionist! So, I was able to change, and I was so glad, because it was a completely different vibe. Basically the second half of the day was all music. I loved playing in the concert band and especially in Lane's orchestra. Mr. Cina was the director and we played great repertoire. I got to play tympani too, which I loved!

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Is that when you started thinking that music was going to be your career?

Fludas: Right after my freshman year is when I seriously thought I wanted to be a musician someday. I thought I was going to be a rock musician, because that's what I was into at that time, and I was in a really good high school rock band. It was power trio called Nuclear Waste. [laughs] But after I graduated from Lane in 1984, I lost interest in playing rock and gravitated towards jazz. I enrolled at Roosevelt University as a music major.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Obviously it didn't inspire you—you left after only a couple of years.

Fludas: Yes, I went there for a year and a half—fall of '85 to spring of '86. But I met some great people in that time—like John Webber, a great bass player who lives in New York. We clicked. He was into the same stuff: Miles, Paul Chambers and the stuff that swung. A lot of guys were interested in fusion, or not swinging. The funny thing is, I liked rock, but I didn't like fusion. Now I can appreciate it a little more, but then, I didn't care about Mahavishnu or Return to Forever or Billy Cobham. I wanted to swing! Roosevelt to me was just


frustrating. I felt like I wasn't going to go anywhere—I wanted to go to New York. But my dad had kidney failure at that time and needed help. My parents were going through personal differences and they got a divorce. I met my wife Cheryl in 1987 and we were married in 1990. There was a lot happening at that time, and I was really enjoying getting my feet wet in New York, but my dad was getting worse. My buddy Webber was like, "You gotta come out. The cats are out here." And it was true—he started working with Lou Donaldson when he moved to New York, so I started salivating. I went to New York for some short visits, but after my dad started to decline, I knew I needed to be in Chicago. He passed away in 1991.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Didn't you end up working with Lou Donaldson?

Fludas: Yeah, my first real gig of note was playing with Lou Donaldson at George's on Kinzie. John Webber and Kenny Washington recommended me for that. I was twenty-one, and my dad was so happy—I'm playing with one of the jazz greats. I was nervous as hell on that gig. Lou Donaldson is notorious for being very outspoken. He knows what he likes, and he knows what he doesn't like. So we started playing his hit tune "The Masquerade is Over," and I didn't really know the arrangement from the album. The song is basically a conga beat on the drum set, and I'm just swinging behind him, and after about eight bars he stops in the middle of his phrase and yells, "Conga beat, man! Conga!" [laughs] He just screamed at me.



The Big Deal Trio: Fludas, Bobby Broom and Dennis Carroll at the Underground Wonder Bar, 1991.



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Fludas and Lin Halliday at the Get Me High Lounge, 1988. Photo by Rusty Jones



Nicholas Payton, Fludas, Ray Brown, Larry Fuller and Kevin Mahogany in May 2001, at the Vienna Konzerthaus for Ray Brown's 75th birthday concert.

So I hit that conga beat! I played with Lou several times after that.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Any regrets?

Fludas: I have some. I don't regret sticking around and taking care of my father, and making a family in Chicago. But I do regret that I didn't have that "growth opportunity" by sticking it out in New York and developing. I think that it was important because I was able to establish some connections with New York musicians. I was meeting all these great musicians who went to Paterson College. Eric Alexander, Peter Bernstein. Jesse Davis, whom I already knew from Chicago. We had a little band together here with Rob Mazurek and John Webber, and a pianist named Kenny Prince. Kenny and Jodie Christian are two pianists I learned a lot from about how to play jazz in real time, and not just playing along with records. "Real time" is when you are on the bandstand and you have to know what to do, and when to do it. I endured the look from Jodie many times, whether it was, *You should (or shouldn't) be playing brushes now or You should (or shouldn't) be playing more actively now.* Those kinds of things, you really refine on the job. I also learned a lot working with Bobby Broom. His sense of time is unlike any other—it is so unique and monumental. His phrasing—the way he phrases over the bar line for a drummer—is incredible. It's really a good healthy challenge, because you have to be listening constantly to where he is venturing. He pushes you. Working with Tommy Flanagan also made me really focus on finesse, dynamics and control. So even though I didn't live in New York, I started to get calls. When Eric Alexander moved to New York I would go often, and we would hang out and play at sessions. A lot of cats would ask me if I was moving to New York soon. So that was a good feeling. It felt like: *Oh, I could do this if I moved to New York. I might actually be able to get some good work and be successful.* But it seemed like every time that I went to New York something came up—first my dad; then some issues with my aunt Jackie, who was going through a hard personal time.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Whether in or out of college, what would you consider to be one of your first big breaks?

Fludas: I don't know if I would call it a break, but one of the changing moments was when I went to Andy's in 1985, to hear

Von Freeman. Webber was playing with him at the time and he introduced me. Von said, "Oh baby, come on up and play one." He brought me up to sit in, and I was really nervous. He put me on the spot—to play "Caravan." I guess Von liked me because after that he was always very gracious and welcoming. I loved to go down to the New Apartment Lounge and sit in. There was another place he played at, called the New Pumpkin. I guess there must have been an *Old Pumpkin Lounge?* I think it was on 78th or 79th. That was one break. I guess, being able to meet Von and feel like, *yeah, I think I can do this.* Also, meeting and playing with Lin Halliday in 1987, and playing at George's in 1988 with Lou Don-

aldson. Playing with pianist Michael Weiss at Bradley's in New York City in June 1989, with Junior Cook. That felt like a big break because Art Blakey, Tommy Flanagan, Cedar Walton and many other heavies were in the club that night.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Did Von give you any advice that resonated with you?

Fludas: I don't recall anything specific. It's more of a vibe—the way he would lock the beat in, or center things with his phrasing. It's more of a feel thing, and I've found that with so many other musicians too. Musicians like Jodie Christian, because I started to work with Jodie after that. It was more unspoken, and it was more profound than words. I learned so much playing with people like Von Freeman, Jodie Christian, Lin Halliday, Earma Thompson, Eddie Johnson. They all had that *real jazz* feeling, and played with taste and swing. They all had that poetry—just beautiful players and people. That's one thing I think is harder for younger student-level players now. That link to the legends is fading, nearly gone. There are a few left, but it was different then. You learned more as an apprentice, on the gig, from masters.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: How did you meet Ray Brown?

Fludas: I was offered the gig in the summer of 1998 when Greg Hutchinson was leaving the band. My first son George was about to be born, so I said no, respectfully. Then, two years later, my wife was pregnant with our second son, Ted. Kariem Riggins called me. Same deal: "Hey man, I'm leaving the band, and Ray says the gig is yours if you want it." I couldn't

turn it down the second time, so I went down to the Showcase after the matinee and played two or three times. So Ray says, "If you want it, first gig is in Irvine, California." With Ray, every song was arranged—each tune had an intro, a specifically arranged melody, and a shout chorus—typically for the drums to fill in—and specific endings. So he sent me about seventy songs to learn: live recordings with Greg Hutchinson, and then there was a multitude of CDs with Gene Harris and later Benny Green and Jeff Hamilton. There was a lot of music to learn for that gig. When I joined, Larry Fuller was the pianist. I went to L.A. to rehearse with him for five days, Monday through Friday, and we rehearsed at this famous piano store for five days—without pay. I found out later. But Ray Brown said, "I don't pay for rehearsals; I pay for the gig. When you're learning the music, that's on you." [laughs] That was summer of 2000.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: From a personality standpoint, when you are first starting out with a bassist, do your personalities have to click?

Fludas: Yeah, to an extent. If you are speaking specifically about Ray, it's a different dynamic, because I was much younger, and basically in awe of him. He's a jazz legend, so the dynamic was different that way. We were kind of like the master and the pupil. I knew I could learn a lot from playing with him. Ray Brown's beat is unlike anyone else's. I always felt like his beat was so strong he didn't need a drum-

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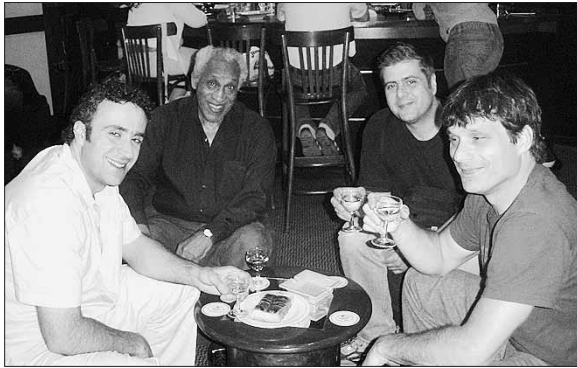
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Fludas, Von Freeman, Ron Perrillo and Dennis Carroll on a layover at Rome airport en route to the Estoril Jazz Fest in 2005.

mer. The strength in his quarter note is like a freight train. Ray also played on top of the beat and pushed the beat, so I had to adjust to that too and try not to rush. I quickly found out playing with him he liked to get to a point of excitement and urgency right away. He didn't want a gradual buildup; he wanted shit to be popping right from the start. When he played with Oscar and Ed, he learned to get the music "popping right from the jump," and there was "no need to take your time." I can't say our personalities clicked. It's a bonus when they do though, for sure.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: You seem to be a build-up type of player.

Fludas: Yeah, I think I lean more toward that, so for me it was a bit of an adjustment. You had to kick it into a higher gear with Ray sooner—otherwise you would get steamrolled. He would say something with that big grin—that grin that wasn't always a grin of joy! It was like, *Get on this now*. He would say, "Let's go! All right! C'mon—now!" It was like a coach saying things to prod or encourage you. Ray was constantly seeking gigs, loved working, and hated days off. I learned so much about how to work arrangements and build intensity. I worked with Ray for about a year and a half.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Didn't you work with Diana Krall shortly after that?

Fludas: Yeah, I did. I met Diana in 2001, while I was on tour with Ray at the Blue Note in New York. She had heard about me before that and had called me, inquiring about some dates in the mid-nineties, because I worked with Benny Green for a while, around '93 and '94, and they had the same manager. I played a couple tours with Benny. He was the first person I went out of the country with—we did some tours for a Spanish promoter named Jordi Sunol. For a while there, Jordi called me to play with many great jazz players, and I got a lot of good exposure thanks to him. I played with Diana in 2002. Basically I subbed for Jeff Hamilton for a short while. It was an interesting experience. It was great to see the world. I got to see ten countries in Asia. We flew in on a private jet to Beijing to play the MTV Asian Music awards. I had a roadie on the tour. Not the usual scene for me!

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Did you meet Benny through Ray?

Fludas: No, I met him while he was working with Ray in Chicago. Kenny Washington told Benny about me and recommended me for some gigs he couldn't make. That's also how I got to play with Johnny Griffin and Tommy Flanagan. Kenny was very supportive and encouraging to me, he helped me lot when I was starting out. Pianist Michael Weiss was too. They both played with Griff.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Talk about your time with Monty Alexander.

Fludas: Lotta fun! He swings so hard and is a very funny cat. I met Monty while working with Ray. We played a few gigs together with Ray and had good chemistry. I started working with him on a semi-regular basis in 2003. Monty had a couple different drummers he would use—in Europe he would use this guy Frits Landesbergen, and then he started calling me frequently to do gigs. I also worked with him on his Jazz & Roots Jamaican project that he was doing. He has a Jamaican rhythm section onstage and his trio, and he alternates between grooves. People loved that in Europe: it was always a successful show and a lot of fun. I played all over Europe with him from 2004 to about 2010. It was great learning to play a bunch of Jamaican music, reggae and ska. I spent a lot of time with Cedar Walton too. I played the last gig Cedar did in the United States—a week-long gig at the Village Vanguard. He died the following month, that August 2013. That was a big loss for me. I loved playing with Cedar and he was just a great cat, all around.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Were you with Ray in Indianapolis when he died?

Fludas: No, I left Ray in fall of 2001. I gave him notice after his seventy-fifth birthday concert. He didn't like that at all; he was irate. But my wife's mother was ill and my aunt had just been diagnosed with cancer. It became a strain to be away from home so much with two small kids at home.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Right after Monty you toured with Joey DeFrancesco.

Fludas: Yes, I played with him for a little over a year. We both would say we needed to play together at some point and



From front to back: Dennis Carroll, Harold Mabern, Fludas and Eric Alexander at Pearl's Restaurant in Chicago, while playing at the Jazz Showcase in May 2011.

it finally happened in 2014. He's a phenomenal natural musician. He has the whole jazz organ history at his command and he plays the trumpet like Miles. One night, we were playing "Budo," and he is walking the bass line in his left hand, and the solo on trumpet. Amazing! It's hard to walk a bass line fast and then noodle with the right hand on the trumpet. Jeff Parker, the guitar player, and I looked at each other like, *What on earth? How is he doing this?!* It's one thing to play a ballad on trumpet and the bass pedals, but he was walking the bass and playing the trumpet solo, on an up-tempo! He is a monster.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Speaking of versatility, are you a closet singer? That is, do you ever have any aspirations to be a singer?

Fludas: Yes, maybe! Art Blakey, Buddy Rich, Grady Tate... it seems like a lot of drummers want to sing, but I don't think I would ever. I don't have the confidence to get up on a stage behind a mic, at least not anytime soon. But I do like to scat or whistle and I have a pretty decent ear and vocabulary. Often times when we are running something down in a rehearsal, I will joke and say to the cats, *I will leave that up to you "musicians,"* because of the old joke that a drummer is not a musician. But a lot of musicians know that they can rely on me for accuracy when it comes to a melody or something like that: *George, is that right?* Yeah, I would like to sing at some point, so in that regard you can say I am a closeted singer.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: What does George Fludas still want to do with his career?

Fludas: Mostly, I want to continue playing with great musicians, and travel the world doing it. I wouldn't necessarily want to lead my own group because I see other people who are bandleaders and they go through so many headaches organizing rehearsals, getting musicians to commit to a schedule, looking for funding. There are so many things that I enjoy about being a sideman. I like to try fit into different situations and to see what I can bring to them, and I enjoy the variety. Honestly, I should make a recording of my own. I have thought about this for a

while now, and I want to have something under my own name; it's just a question of finding the right combination of people. There are so many musicians that I really enjoy playing with, especially Ron Perrillo and Dennis Carroll.

Chicago Jazz Magazine: Is that the most likely scenario?

Fludas: I would say so. I would like to do something to document the sound that we have as a trio. In my opinion, it's one of the finest trios anywhere. Ron is a world-class pianist who deserves wider recognition. Every good musician acknowledges that he is on a high level artistically—he is an uncompromising artist. But there are other possibilities, maybe with a group of my favorite New York musicians. Not sure yet. One of the great things about this music is that there are so many possibilities. It's related to the people that you meet, so I really don't know what's next. The only thing I can say is that I look forward to whatever it is, because I know there's always going to be some new inspiration or new horizon, and that those opportunities are going to change my playing. I want to be constantly evolving. So that's what's next, is being open to the new opportunities and experiences that the music provides.

■CJM

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Jimmy Cobb and Fludas at St. Peter's Church in New York at the Cedar Walton's memorial, November 2013.