

There's a nostalgic photo from his own youth that trumpeter-composer-arranger-bandleader and Baltimore native Bill Warfield cherishes to this day. It's a picture of his father and his uncle John in a fishing boat, tonging for oysters on Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in the United States. "My father's family came from Delmarva Peninsula there and they were fishermen on the Chesapeake Bay," he recalled. "He and all his brothers grew up fishing the brackish water on the Bay. Those guys would get up at like four in the morning to go out crabbing and oystering and all that. By the time this photo was taken, my father had moved away from the Bay. He became a cash register mechanic for NCR but all of his brothers stayed there. So in the photo, uncle John is standing there in his work clothes with the tongs and my father is standing next to him, watching him work. It's a really cool photo, man. And when I look at it, I think about my Dad all the time. He was a really unique individual." Lost in reverie, Warfield continued. "It was really a trip to grow up on Chesapeake Bay. Hell, I basically was down there a third of my life. The lifestyle was incredibly laid back and they were always really very sweet people around there. I just have so many great memories of that place."

In putting together this fourth album by his Hell's Kitchen Funk Orchestra, Warfield reached out to a fellow Baltimorean, alto sax great Gary Bartz, to see if he too had fond memories of Chesapeake Bay. "It turns out he used to go down and hang out there during the summer, so we both had this feeling for the Bay," said Warfield. "It's got a vibe when you go down there and that's what I'm trying to sort of grab with this project. And Gary personifies the vibe of the Bay. If anybody's got it down, he's got it down."

While Warfield and Bartz did indeed both grow up in Baltimore, they are separated by 11 years (Warfield is 72, Bartz is 83). So it's no wonder they didn't travel in the same circles back in the day. But Warfield does have vivid memories, after he had moved to New York in 1980, of seeing Bartz playing at The Closet with trumpet great Woody Shaw. "It was this little jazz club on Center Street, no bigger than a living room," he recalled. "When I visited home, I'd go down there and he and Woody were playing. And the music was unbelievable. But I never said anything to Gary at the time."

By then, Bartz had played on Shaw's great 1971 Contemporary album, *Blackstone Legacy*, which was Warfield's first Woody Shaw album, as well as on two Columbia albums, 1980's *For Sure!* and 1981's *United*. "Woody played the trumpet like Coltrane played the saxophone," he recalled of his boyhood hero. "He did all that intervallic shit, and nobody else had been doing that. Freddie Hubbard and all those guys were doing the pentatonic thing but Woody was really doing that interval thing and completely playing in other keys, which was something new." Warfield had earlier seen Woody Shaw play at Baltimore's Famous Ballroom when he was still attending Towson University under the tutelage of Hank Levy (saxophonist-composer for Stan Kenton and Don Ellis orchestras). "My friend turned me on Woody Shaw," he recalled. "He gave me the Jazz Messengers album *Child's Dance* because he didn't like it, and Woody Shaw was on it. So I took the record home and, I mean, I just lost my mind. I couldn't believe how beautiful he sounded. And then I come to find out that Woody was at the Famous Ballroom that Sunday with Ronnie Matthews, Stafford James and Louis Hayes, so I went. The Famous Ballroom was this big kind of cabaret ballroom where from 5 to 9 every Sunday for like two bucks you could hear all these great jazz musicians. The Left Bank Jazz Society was always putting on events there, and I used to say to my friends, 'Let's go down to Famous,' to see all these great artists there. It was pretty amazing place. They had great soul food and you could buy a six pack of beer and hang out with the artists during the long breaks between sets. So you could go up and talk to them. I'm sorry I didn't go more often. It was a wonderful place. I wish there were still joints like that today."

The night Warfield caught Woody Shaw at the Famous Ballroom, he did indeed engage him in conversation between sets. "I had just transcribed one of the tunes off that Jazz Messengers record I had called 'C.C.,' and Woody opened his set with that tune that night I was there. So I was all excited on the first break and just went running right up to him saying, 'Mr. Shaw, I just found out about you and I've been listening to you on record all week. I just transcribed your solo on 'C.C.' from that Messengers album and he looked at me and he says, 'Come here with me for a minute.' So we went in this back room for half an hour and he told me how he plays 'C.C.' He was completely generous with his time."

Fittingly, Warfield pays tribute here to his trumpet hero on "Rosewood," title track of Shaw's 1978 Columbia album. The Hell's Kitchen Funk Orchestra rendition features strong solos from tenor saxophonist Dave Riekenberg and alto saxophonist Lou Marini while Bartz contributes a lyrical soprano sax solo near the end of the piece that develops into a soaring showcase.

Bartz's presence is felt profoundly throughout Chesapeake, particularly on Tom Harrell's "Terrestris," Cecilia Coleman's affecting title track and the alto saxophonist's own evocative, calming ballad "Nusia's Poem," with its allusions to Coltrane's "Naima." Bartz also delivers a closing a cappella version of the stirring "Beneath the Stacks" theme that bookends Chesapeake.

"I ran into Gary fairly recently at Lincoln Center and I had never met him, so I went over and introduced myself," said Warfield. "It turns out we knew a lot of the same people and had some of the same teachers growing up in Baltimore, though we never knew each other there. But we spent a lot of time together putting this recording together, and it was like a life lesson, man. That I got the chance to meet him and do this record with him and get to know him on that level was a real gift to me. He's just an extraordinary musician and an extraordinary human being. I just love him."

Other guests on Chesapeake include longtime Mingus Big Band trombonist Conrad Herwig, who solos with typical virtuosity on "Nusia's Poem" and Warfield's "Light," and former musical director, band leader and sidekick to David Letterman for 33 years, Paul Shaffer, who supplies fundamental Hammond B-3 organ work throughout. "You don't think of Paul Shaffer as a jazz Hammond player," said Warfield. "He's a studio Hammond player and he's a rock and roll player. That's what he likes. But he came in and he got sounds on the B-3 that just knocked my socks off. I mean, he really knows how to play that instrument. And he's got a rhythmic thing that he does when he plays that really makes everything kind of come together on a cut. When you put his comping on there, it's pretty remarkable. I invited Paul to play on the previous Hell's Kitchen Funk Orchestra albums and it was just amazing. I always get a big kick out of working with Paul in the studio. It's like watching a little kid again. And you have to admire after all those years of doing that job how he still loves making music and still gets excited by it."

Shaffer's presence is most prominently felt on the organ-fueled crescendo to "Currents," the subtle cushion he provides beneath the mournful minor key Hoagy Carmichael standard "Baltimore Oriole" (a tune famously covered by the likes of Sheila Jordan, Carmen McRae and Bob Dorough and sung here by Jasia Ries), on Cecilia Coleman's swaggering, blues-tinged shuffle-swing number "The Message" and The Meters' funk anthem, "Cissy Strut," which carries a potent horn arrangement by Warfield reminiscent of Tower of Power. "The thing I did most in Baltimore when I was growing up was playing with R&B bands," said Warfield. "And of course, at the time when I was there, Tower of Power was big. And I played a lot of that music in Baltimore. Gary did too."

“One band I played with was called Both Worlds,” he continued. “The drummer was a guy named Ralph (Otis) Fisher, and Dennis Chambers talks about how growing up he emulated Ralph. Ralph passed away a long time ago but he was an incredible funk drummer. There was another funk band called Pockets that the bassist Gary Grainger was in. He later joined Dennis Chambers in John Scofield’s mid ‘80s band. But that funk sound was such a big part of the Baltimore scene back then. In fact, I call Baltimore the Oakland of the East Coast because they’re so similar in temperament and industrial base and the blue collar kind of worker thing that was happening while I was there. And the funk is unmistakable. The Hell’s Kitchen Funk Orchestra is actually patterned after Both Worlds. And my thought was in forming the band was, ‘Boy, a jazz version of Both Worlds would be great.’ So that’s why I started this thing, though it ended up being jazzier than the stuff I played with Both Worlds.”

A Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra alumni, Warfield adeptly integrates a motif from Lee Morgan’s “Sidewinder” into the fabric of Harrell’s Latin flavored “Terrestris” in his clever arrangement, then drops in a quote from Sonny Rollins’ “Pent-Up House” in the intricate horn lines near the end of the piece (the title of which roughly translates to “of the Earth”). Cecil McBee’s “Wilpan’s Walk” is a burner highlighted by bold, incandescent solos from Marini, Warfield and Riekenberg. “That was my favorite tune when I was in college,” said Warfield. “I mean, I wore that Music Inc. album (1970’s Live at Slugs, Vol. 1) out listening to that damn tune. It was Charles Tolliver’s group and his bass player was Cecil McBee with Stanley Cowell on piano and Jimmy Hopps on drums. And before I did that chart on it, I researched it and found out that the person who had recorded that tune the most was Charles Lloyd (who recorded it first in 1966 on The Flowering with Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette and McBee). And Tolliver’s Music Inc. was one of my favorite quartets at the time. I just played that record incessantly. So I just included it here because I just like the tune so much.”

Warfield’s “Light,” a kind of funky extrapolation on the traditional gospel tune “This Little Light of Mine,” features stellar soloing from trombonist Herwig, tenorist Riekenberg and guitarist Bruce Arnold, who digs in with distortion-laced fury.

Cecilia Coleman’s “The Message,” which carries a touch of swagger reminiscent of Neal Hefti’s “The Odd Couple,” features irrepressible solos from Warfield, Bartz and guitarist Mark Chertkoff. And her luminous title track features her own lush horn arrangements providing a cushion for the gently introspective number while featuring Bartz’s brilliant soloing. “That’s my favorite cut on the record,” said Warfield. “She really knocked it out of the park with that one. I’ve rarely used other people’s compositions on my records, but in Cecilia’s case I made an exception. I met Cecilia when I was subbing in her big band. She’s just a remarkable big band writer and though she was a little shy about bringing things into Hell’s Kitchen rehearsals, I finally said, ‘You got to write some stuff. I can’t really do all of this myself.’ So she contributed three pieces, actually.

‘The Message’ and ‘Chesapeake’ appear on the album and this other slow piece she wrote that we just called “GBHKFO” didn’t fit on the album because it’s nine minutes long and I had too much long stuff on there already. So I’m probably going to release that as a single when the album comes out in August.”

One of the more flexible large ensembles on the New York scene, capable of swinging fervently, playing a persuasive mambo or laying down the funk in no uncertain terms, the Hell’s Kitchen Funk Orchestra covers a lot of bases on Chesapeake. Said Warfield, “I want to thank all the people that came together for this project — and there’s got to be 25 of them in all. It’s a very important part of my musical history now, and I’m grateful for it.”

Listeners of Chesapeake, Warfield's most autobiographical project to date, will be grateful as well. — Bill Milkowski

Bill Milkowski is a longtime contributor to Downbeat, Jazziz and Absolute Sound magazines. He is also the author of biographies on Jaco Pastorius, Pat Martino and Michael Brecker. His website is billmilkowski.com