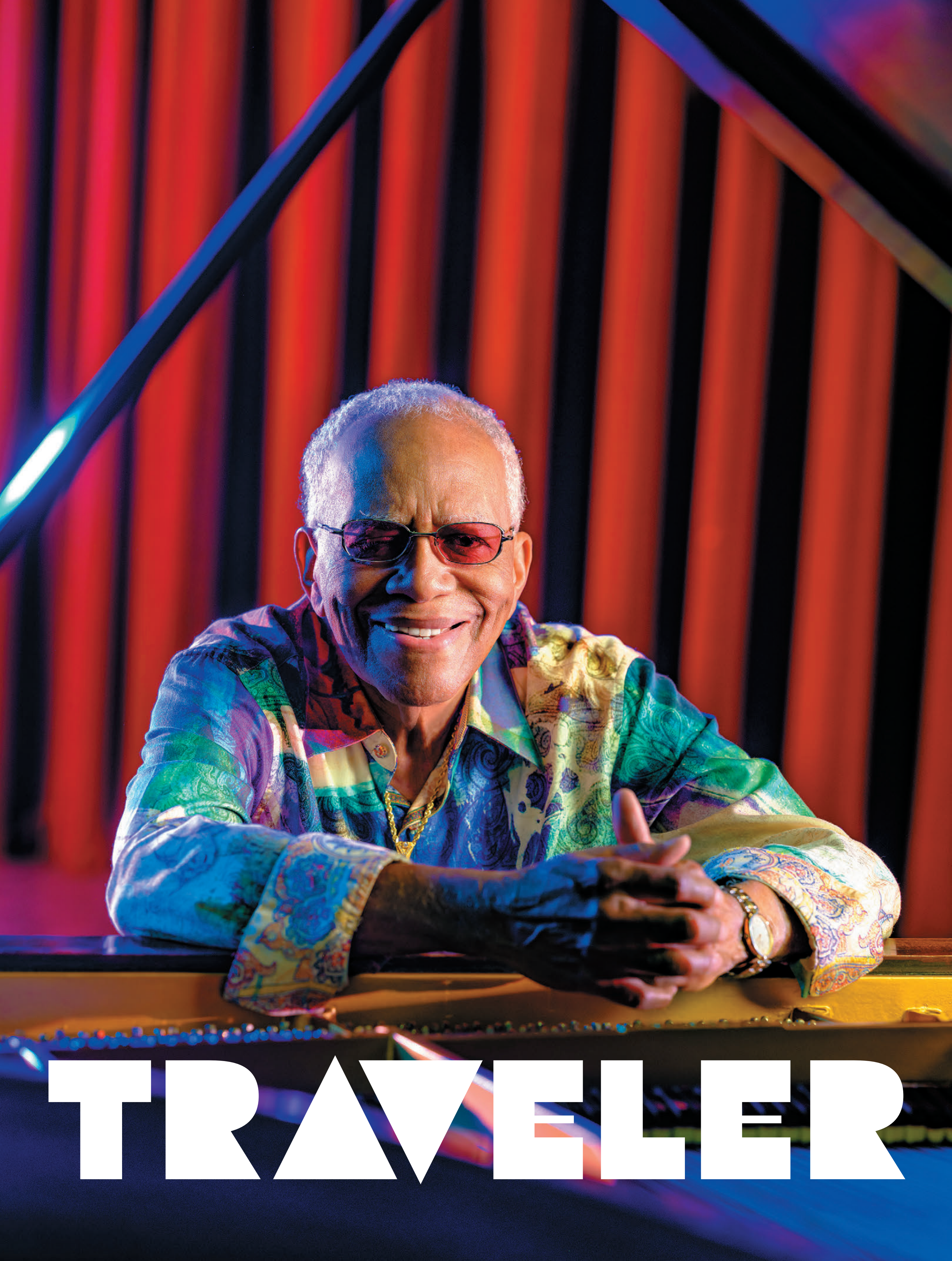
COSMIC

Keyboardist **LONNIE LISTON SMITH** transcends the boundaries of jazz, inspiring future generations to innovate in their own ways

BY DAVY JONES
PORTRAIT BY ZAID HAMID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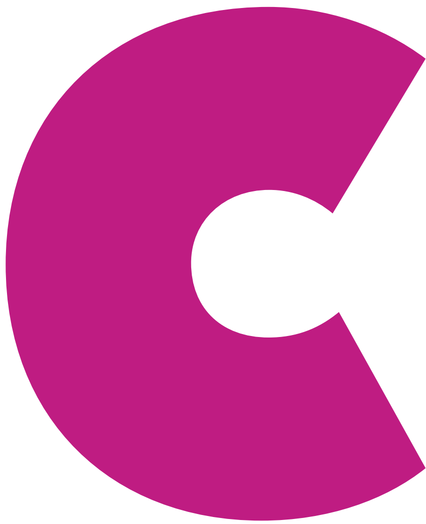

all it the Big Bang of the cosmic sound.

In 1970, at the storied Record Plant recording studio in Los Angeles, Lonnie Liston Smith Jr. first sat at a Fender Rhodes electric piano. While he waited for the other players to unpack at a recording session for the Pharoah Sanders album "Thembi," Smith familiarized himself with the Rhodes. Then, as he began to play, history happened.

"Everybody ran over," Smith recalls, "Pharoah, the engineer, everyone said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I don't know, I'm just writing this song. It's the first time I've played the Fender Rhodes.' They said, 'We've got to record this right now. What are you going to call it?' I was studying astral projection, and it sounded like we were floating, so I said, 'Let's call it "Astral Traveling." ' "

Smith, a Richmond native, is credited with establishing a vast and influential area of the jazz landscape, one defined by a fluidity of sound and an uplifting spiritualism. As he sat at that Rhodes piano in LA, his career was zooming skyward. Stints with great jazz players were already in his rearview mirror. But that particular moment found Smith drifting in a sonic direction that would soon reach across the globe and that has since spanned generations of musicians who have followed in his footsteps.

"Seems like all the songs I did — 'Give Peace a Chance' and 'Expansions' — people say they need that now," Smith says. "They definitely need 'Visions of a New World' because I think this is the first time in the history of mankind when the whole world is shut down at the same time."

A MUSICAL UPBRINGING

Smith, 81, who now lives in Twin Hickory in Short Pump with his wife, Louise, grew up in Church Hill, surrounded by musicianship to a rare degree. His father, Lonnie Sr., sang with the nationally known gospel group The Harmonizing Four, rubbing elbows with some of the genre's biggest names.

"All the gospel groups used to come by the house," the younger Smith remembers. "Sam Cooke when he was with the Soul Stirrers, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Sister Rosetta Tharpe. She was crazy about my father and the Harmonizing Four. … She moved to Richmond, and I used to listen to her play guitar and said, 'Wow, this is different.' "

Smith says his father was always on the lookout for new sounds, and not just within the world of gospel. "He loved all

kinds of music, and that was a great influence. In New York, [The Harmonizing Four would] do the Apollo, then he'd go and listen to all types of music, and he'd tell me about all these great musicians when he got back home."

Richmond also bustled with touring talent in the 1940s and '50s, at venues such as the Hippodrome, the Market Inn and the Mosque (now the Altria Theater). As he soaked it all in, Smith searched for his own voice.

Smith graduated from Armstrong High School in 1957. He speaks highly of his experience there — of the new facility the school moved into, and of the care he received from his teachers. He sought to make the most of every musical outlet, including the choir, which he led as president in his senior year. (He was also named the "friendliest" and "best dressed" male student in his graduating class.)

"We used to all sing," he recalls. "I have two younger brothers, and they have the same beautiful tenor voice that my father had, but I can only sing the bass. ... I was in the marching band all the way from elementary school through college, sang in the choirs, sang the bass parts, and of course, meanwhile, [I was] playing piano."

He continued his musical education at Morgan State University in Baltimore and joined the house band at the city's Royal Theatre. The Royal was part of a circuit, with sister theaters in New York; Chicago; Washington, D.C.; and Philadelphia. "All these top acts would do seven days in each city," Smith recalls. "When they came through Baltimore, you were playing behind all the Motown acts, Curtis Mayfield, all of them."

Smith had found his calling, but his searching continued. In 1963, he moved to the city where his father's Harmonizing Four tour stories originated.

"When I went to New York," he remembers, "I wanted an opportunity to play with all the masters that I'd been listening to. I got an opportunity to play with Max Roach, I played with Art Blakey and the

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Jazz Messengers, Rahssan Roland Kirk, all the singers — Betty Carter, Dakota Staton, Joe Williams. These are the people that I used to go watch at the Mosque."

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

But Smith sought more than escalating levels of success. The horizons he explored after joining saxophonist Pharoah Sanders' ensemble in the late 1960s pushed at the outermost boundaries of jazz instrumentation.

A bandmate of John Coltrane's when Coltrane was venturing deep into the avant-garde, Sanders looked to extract more human sounds from his instrument — growling and overblowing that evoked an intense range of emotions. Smith helped Sanders create major entries in the spiritual jazz canon, including the albums "Karma," "Jewels of Thought" and the aforementioned "Thembi."

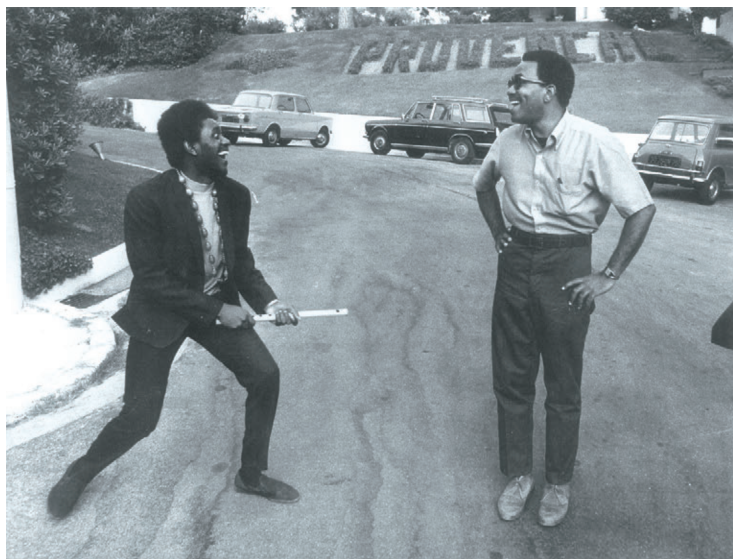
Richmond-based saxophonist and Plunky & Oneness leader James "Plunky" Branch was living in San Francisco at the time, and he'd see Sanders play at every opportunity. He calls Smith's playing "essential to what Pharoah was doing."

"It combined the rhythm of jazz and African music along with what I called invocation-type music — a prayerful suspension of chord changes, performing this music based on how it feels. ... Lonnie made that modal music have body, spirituality and substance."

"When I got with Pharoah," Smith explains, "I had to try to figure out ways to get more sound. So I'm using my 10 fingers, but then sometimes you might use your forearm. You're not banging, you're trying to get more sound. Some- ›

RECORD ALBUMS COURTESY MICHAEL MURPHY, STAFF PHOTO

Lonnie Liston Smith has released more than a dozen jazz albums, many of which have become collector's items.



Musician Pharoah Sanders *(left)* and Smith in France, 1977

times you reach [inside the piano] to the strings. Trying all kinds of things."

Given Smith's adventurous approach, both with Sanders and soon after with Argentine saxophonist Gato Barbieri, it seemed preordained that he would link up with Miles Davis in the early 1970s. Recording for Davis' albums "On the Corner" and "Big Fun" demanded Smith make new strides in his development as an artist, some of which were spurred by the legendary trumpeter's signature directness.

"Can I take it home and practice?" Smith asked upon being assigned to play an unfamiliar Yamaha electric organ. Davis' reply: "No."

Then there's the time Smith learned at the last minute that he'd be one of three keyboardists playing simultaneously. Davis' words of encouragement: "What the f--- are you waiting for?"

"That's how Miles made you strong," Smith says. "He'd get upset if you weren't creating every day or every night you were performing with him."

One crucial leap forward during Smith's time with Davis resulted not from the bandleader's gruff motivational style, but from Smith's application of the tools Davis was using. "He had all these pedals hooked up on the floor on his trumpet," he recalls. " I said, 'Now, if I hook these pedals up to the Fender Rhodes, I wonder what would happen?' And it worked."

"It's not often that you get to be innovative and popular and uplifting all at the same time," Branch says of Smith. "He may be the definitive musician to combine those three things."

WORLDWIDE SUCCESS

Smith recorded his 1973 debut, "Astral Traveling," at the encouragement of Bob Thiele, the producer and Flying Dutchman label owner who recorded countless jazz greats, including John Coltrane. Audiences responded quickly, and within months, Smith left Davis' ensemble to form his own. While he saw similar success with his second effort, "Cosmic Funk," his third album, "Expansions," launched his career as bandleader into the stratosphere. "That just took off worldwide," Smith says.

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The music database Discogs lists 33 pressings of "Expansions," including multiple editions from 1975, the year it was released, manufactured as far away as Germany, France and South Africa. "Bob Thiele was dealing with RCA Records, and they started scrambling," Smith says. "They had to go back and reprint thousands and thousands." Smith's breakthrough LP landed at No. 10 on Billboard's year-end jazz albums chart for 1975.

"Back in the days when he released the 'Expansions' album, there was no genre called smooth jazz," says Branch, a founder of the Richmond Jazz Society. "He would be the bridge between smooth jazz and spiritual jazz, because his music is very smooth and very appealing and very soothing, not as abrasive as some of the other spiritual jazz or some of the avant-garde jazz."

The title track of "Expansions" is a jazz-funk touchstone, featuring a buoyant blend of treated keyboard sounds and fusion elements, with vocals from Smith's brother Donald entreating listeners "to understand we all must live in peace."

"My father and my mother were very spiritual," Smith says. "I was expanding on making it more universal, that gospel and that spirituality that I received from them. Let's take it to the whole world and expand their minds, so we can have a vision of the new world, everyone living in peace and harmony."

Those themes remained at the forefront of Smith's music, from a string of late-1970s albums on Columbia Records to an early-1980s run on Bob Thiele's newly formed Doctor Jazz imprint. A key col- >

FROM LEFT: COURTESY LONNIE LISTON SMITH; ZAID HAMID, PIANO COURTESY THE CULTURAL ARTS CENTER AT GLEN ALLEN

Musical partner and friend Marcus Miller *(left)* listens as Smith plays the keys of the cosmos.

laborator during this period was two-time Grammy winner Marcus Miller. The iconic bassist and composer was just 16 when he was introduced to Smith, yet Miller quickly earned Smith's confidence, and some of Miller's earliest compositions found a home on Smith's Columbia-era albums.

"He provided me with that stage as a writer," Miller says, "and he would let me arrange the band and tell them what I thought they should play, which was kind of crazy, because I'm this little 16-, 17-year-old kid instructing the older guys. But he got a kick out of it."

Identifying and empowering promising young players is among the highest callings a masterful jazz musician can answer. Miller draws a direct line from Smith's support to that of Miles Davis, with whom Miller would also go on to collaborate.

"Once [Smith] figured out that I had some talent," Miller recalls, "he's like, 'C'mon, do your thing.' And I'm doing the same thing with young guys in my group. I don't know if Miles had a mentor, or if it just came from him, but that's a tradition that's being passed down through generations."

LEGACY AND INFLUENCE

There may be no better lens through which to view Smith's lasting impact than that of Devonne Harris, who plays keys for Richmond group Butcher Brown and produces beats as DJ Harrison. "Here's a guy who took his dream and his vision and actually made it happen," Harris says. "For a lot of creatives who are here in Richmond, that's definitely influential."

Harris grew up surrounded by Smith's music — "My dad had a lot of his records," he says — and he sought out those same albums upon starting his own collection. He's since continued down Smith's trailblazing path by customizing the sound of his keys. "He creates his own textures," Harris says. "I've definitely picked up on that from him."

Smith returned to Richmond from New York in 1988, seeing in his hometown qualities that local artists such as Harris continue to benefit from: a location that's convenient for East Coast touring and easy access to air travel. Ironically, Smith was in Atlanta being interviewed for radio when Butcher Brown first crossed his radar a handful of years ago. "The interviewer said, 'Man, have you heard this group from Richmond, Butcher Brown? Let me play this record for you,' " he recalls.

Smith made contact via the group's drummer, Corey Fonville, and he arranged to visit the Butcher Brown home studio. "We jammed a little bit, we hung out, he played the Rhodes and started playing some of his hits," Fonville recalls. "It was a very special moment."

"Having him over at the house was like our own private master class," Harris says. "It was great. It was almost like he wanted to come into our world. Obviously, we know so much about his world."

As a beatmaker, Harris understands another important facet of Smith's legacy: hip-hop sampling. Smith's compositions have been sampled heavily, perhaps most notably on Jay-Z's "Dead Presidents," a song that incorporates the lilting piano from Smith's "A Garden of Peace."

Smith's 1977 "Live" album was crucial to Harris' early exploration of sampling, and repurposing Smith's music is one way to acknowledge that influence. "He's one of the artists that understands that sam-

COURTESY LONNIE LISTON SMITH

pling is paying homage," Harris says. "We grew up on this, and we want to show the artist we're sampling, 'Hey, we know about this, and we're trying to keep it alive.' "

Richmond DJ Zak Young, who makes beats as DJ Mentos, cites Smith's use of space as another reason his tracks are revisited.

"[With] music that's real dense, it's harder to find isolated sounds," Young says. "But with a Lonnie Liston Smith record, you might have an organ sound or a synth sound, and the vibrations that go along with it. That airy, sparse sound that we appreciate in his music would allow a producer to isolate something more specific."

The openness with which Smith has approached music throughout his life extends to hearing his songs sampled. "I look at it like it's an arrangement," Smith says. "When they sample it, they arrange it differently. That's what we do with songs. We arrange it our way, but somebody else might record it and [say], 'OK, I can put this spin on it.' "

Smith got to close that loop and collaborate in real time on the groundbreaking 1993 Guru album "Jazzmatazz Volume 1," which paired hip-hop production with live studio performances by notable jazz artists, including Branford Marsalis, Donald Byrd, Gary Barnacle and Roy Ayers.

"When they SAMPLE it, they ARRANGE it differently. That's what we do with SONGS."

"I learned a lot in that situation," Smith says, "because I was around the rappers. ... They used to tease me, because I'm so laid back. I'd come in the room, and they'd say, 'Oh, man, get my coat. A cool breeze just came in.' "

It wasn't the first time he helped break down a barrier between the two genres. In 1988, hip-hop group Stetsasonic released "Talkin' All That Jazz," with lyrics that pushed back against accusations of artistic inauthenticity associated with sampling. It incorporated the distinctive, looping bass notes from "Expansions," and when the time came to negotiate rights — then a hot-button issue, given mounting legal pressure around uncleared samples — rapper and producer Daddy-O spoke directly with Smith. Securing sampling rights typically involves an upfront fee, a percentage of profits or both, yet Smith bestowed an unusually generous blessing by asking for neither. "Literally, he gave me the copyright for my song," Daddy-O recounts. "For me, it was almost an out-of-body experience.

"I solidly believe that we should be connected to the music before us," Daddy-O adds, praising Smith's willingness to confer artist to artist. "There's absolutely no reason that the kind of [call] that happened between me and Lonnie Liston Smith Jr. should not be an ongoing thing."

"It demonstrates yet again his openness and his expansiveness," Branch says of Smith's embrace of sampling. "The idea of expanding yourself beyond what you immediately see. He's just been a really important figure in jazz music."

Morgan State University's board of regents agrees, and on May 15, 2021, the class of 1961 alum was awarded an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree. He calls it a "proud moment" — a highlight during a year in which public appearances were scarce. Smith has continued performing, often standing at his keys in recent years, a technique he picked up while gigging in London. He no longer wears the colorful knit hats that defined his look during the Cosmic Echoes days, though you're still likely to see him in dark-tinted glasses like he wore then.

Plans to tour are on hold, owing to pandemic concerns and travel restrictions. He's featured on the eleventh volume in Adrian Younge and Ali Shaheed Muhammad's "Jazz Is Dead," collaborative LP series, out later this month. And he has intends to return to the stage when conditions improve.

"Lonnie would say to me, 'Hey, man, I just want to bring people some beauty,' " Miller says. "You didn't have to take a jazz appreciation course to dig it. That was his mission, to create music that had a vibe, that had depth to it, but also had something that would bring the community together." ■

Miles Davis and Lonnie Liston Smith performing in concert