

Jazz Beyond Borders

Kenney Polson Biography

Jazz saxophonist Kenney Polson is a distinguished musician, composer and educator. Currently based in the Pacific Northwest, he has lived and performed in over 50 countries. Known widely as a smooth jazz artist, his seasoned musical style incorporates Latin, classical, New Age, rhythm & blues, funk and gospel influences.

Polson has appeared on U.S. television with jazz greats Kenny Burrell, Jimmy Heath, Phil Woods, David Sanborn and Wynton Marsalis, and on the popular “Show do Jimmy” show in Bogota, Colombia. He has performed live with Joe Williams, Gil Scott-Heron, Michael Henderson, Norman Connors, Bettye Swan and Lee Garrett.

Polson’s smooth saxophone is well known in Pacific Northwest jazz haunts such as The Jazz Station in Eugene, Jack London Jazz Club in Portland, The Royal Esquire in Seattle and the 1905 Jazz Club in Portland. He has toured Japan, Korea, Hawaii, Colombia, Brazil, and over a dozen Caribbean Islands. In 2016 and 2017, he toured extensively with Rick James’ Original Stone City Band playing major festivals such as Capital City Jazz Festival on the East Coast and Orange County Funk Fest in California. With the Kenney Polson group and other ensembles, he has played the Stockton Smooth Jazz Festival, PDX Jazz Festival and Vanport Jazz Festival on the West Coast as well as Lassen College with Louis Price (Temptations). He also appeared at Festival del Caribe in Cartagena, Colombia.

His ties to West Coast musicians remain strong. His upcoming album *For Lovers Only* (scheduled for 2019 release) includes leading players such as guitarist Bruce Conte and keyboardist Roger Smith (Tower of Power), trumpeter Larry Gittens (Kool & The Gang), guitarist Phil Upchurch (Donny Hathaway and George Benson), and smooth jazz pioneer - pianist Tom Grant. Trombonist Fred Wesley (Parliament Funkadelic) and bassist/vocalist Michael Henderson (Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder) are also featured. Some of Brazil’s most notable jazz musicians (Marcio Montarroyos, Nico Assumpcao and Marinho Boffa) are heard on his 2016 album, *Paradise, Volume I*.

Kenney Polson’s approach to music focuses on strong, memorable melody, appealing groove, and rich chord structure. Reviewing the album *Paradise, Volume I*, jazz critic Scott Yanow writes, “Polson’s tones on his instruments are beautiful and he loves to caress the melodies, putting a lot of thoughtful emotion into the themes.” He creates “consistently fresh variations that are a bit boppish while keeping the melody close by.”

Released on the Prodigee label, that recording includes 11 originals. It debuted at Number 55 on iTunes for top new jazz recordings. The inspiration for the album arose

while Polson was teaching in Rio de Janeiro, playing with the local musicians, whose culture and approach to life he admired. He has also released three successful singles. “Babydoll” came out in 2016. The associated video was No. 1 on SmoothJazz.com for one month. “Toe Jam” in 2017 and “Love on a Two Way Street” in 2018 continue to enjoy airplay. His fourth single, “Blessed,” will be released ahead of his next album *For Lovers Only*. That project blends smooth jazz with rhythm & blues.

Early Life and Education

Born in **Kansas City, Missouri**, Kenney Polson spent his early years surrounded by family. His grandfather, “Chubby Wayne” Harshaw, provided the major musical influence of his childhood. “Chubby Wayne” was an active entertainer who sang with Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Julia Lee and other notables of his time. Young Kenney was surrounded by musical family members, including his mother and uncles. His Uncle Charles sang with the Coasters and all of them played instruments.

Polson’s musical education began in middle school in **Bakersfield, California** where he learned saxophone and played in the band. In high school, he played in advanced band through his senior year, marching in parades and playing for football games—happy just to be involved in music. He was playing well enough, so that on family visits to Kansas City, his grandfather let him sit in with older musicians at the black jam sessions.

After graduation, Polson and his Top-40 band tried to make it in the big city – Los Angeles. They stayed in a run-down apartment building and earned grocery money by winning prizes at talent shows. He eventually moved back to Bakersfield and was soon pursuing a college degree.

At **Fresno City College** the woodwind choir director declared that all saxophonists must learn to play clarinet. Polson did – and was glad of it. His jazz band director, a Latino named Gilbert Rodriguez, encouraged him to pursue a career as a music educator, to lead the way for more men of color in that field.

Rodriguez’ advice was prophetic: When Polson moved on to **California State University-Fresno**, he found few other blacks and encountered racial prejudice. Still, it was at CSU-Fresno that he was first able to travel outside the USA, touring with the symphonic band to South Korea and Japan. In spite of the biased environment, he earned a B.A. in music education (1983).

After CSU-Fresno, Polson spent some years as a working musician, playing in a series of Top-40s bands in Fresno and teaching in public elementary schools. In the late 80s, an international job fair in San Diego led him to **Bogota, Colombia**. From 1988 to 1990, he directed the band at Colegio Nueva Granada and he organized a successful international school band festival, held in Santiago, Chile. He left Bogota to accept a teaching post at the American School in Rio de Janeiro (1990-95). In both places, he was active performing and recording with some of the most outstanding artists of the region.

Feeling the need to continue his education, Polson left South America to attend **Howard University** in Washington, DC. The racially tolerant environment at Howard enhanced his self-esteem, restored his love of learning, and helped further his career. While there, he played in the jazz band and performed at Kennedy Center, traveled to the Virgin Islands, performed with jazz legend Benny Golson and began composing big band music. He earned a master's in jazz composition and arranging in 1997.

After Howard, another international opportunity beckoned. For a year, he taught band and orchestra at the International School of Beijing. In China, he had the opportunity to perform with Chinese saxophonist Liu Yuan. In 1999, Polson returned to the West Coast. He continued his career of teaching and performing in California, Oregon and Washington State. In 2015, he earned an Education Specialist Degree in education administration at **Lewis & Clark College** in Portland.

Polson has taught college and university, high school and elementary school levels. As an educator, he wants his students to have a fun and a relaxing time as they learn the basic mechanics of music such as scales, basic chord progressions, arpeggios, and articulation – all the skills needed to play jazz standards.

In considering the future of jazz, he believes that we are awaiting the next Coltrane, a major innovator to lead the way to a new future for jazz. Until then, the jazz industry, artists, and audiences need to embrace ideas from unknown artists. He feels that sometimes jazz is put into a little box, but the genre is just too big to be confined to narrow limits.

Jazz Beyond Borders is a Cultural Diversity Project of The Phillips Agency
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