

## BRANDON SANDERS

### *Biography*

As far as drummer **Brandon Sanders** is concerned, everyone should have a grandmother who runs a jazz club. It was at the Casablanca, his grandmother's boite in Kansas City, that he was first exposed to the music that changed his life. During summer visits from his home in Los Angeles in the mid-1970s through the late '80s, young Brandon not only encountered the music of such greats as Jimmy Smith, Grant Green, and Lou Donaldson, he also learned about their lives from the stories his grandma told him.

At 52, Sanders may be long removed from those formative days, but on his splendid debut album, *Compton's Finest*, the influence of his grandmother, Ernestine Parker, can be detected in his stylistic foray into bop tradition and his ease with iconic tunes like "**Body and Soul**" and "**Monk's Dream**." The album may be the work of a late bloomer, but its emotional depth is the mark of a seasoned veteran.

The recording, which features vibraphone great **Warren Wolf** and young singing star **Jazzmeia Horn**, also draws from Sanders's parallel career as a social worker. "It's about trying to lift people's spirits," he says. "That's what I try to do as a social worker. It's about making sure that people leave feeling different than when they came in."

With his understated, whispery light touch on the drums, Sanders breathes fresh life into the standards, which also include "**In a Sentimental Mood**" and "**Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise**." And with a strong band including tenor saxophonist **Chris Lewis**, pianist **Keith Brown**, and bassist **Eric Wheeler**, the drummer shifts into a pop mode on the Michael Jackson hit "**I Can't Help It**," which, with Horn at her most alluring, boasts an Earth, Wind and Fire vibe.

*Compton's Finest*, named for the town in which Sanders came of age, includes two original tunes by him. The bluesy title track reveals his deep streak of humanism in striving to rescue the image of Compton from its portrayal in films and rap songs. "When people think of Compton, they think negative thoughts, right?" he says. "I wanted to show that there is a positivity in Compton, that people have come out of there and done positive things."

His other original, "**SJB**," a cheery, Horace Silver-style hard bop tune, pays homage to a friend whose perseverance through difficult times "inspired me to push through and make things happen, no matter how challenging the circumstances may have seemed."

And then there's the band's lovely, prancing treatment of the Kenny Barron classic, "**Voyage**," one of Sanders's favorite compositions, which speaks to his sense of flow. "I was a deejay when I was like 14 or 15 and ever since, my whole objective has been to get the listener to go from tune to tune, like, you know you can't stop."

**Brandon Sanders** was born on February 20, 1971 in Kansas City, Kansas. When he was nearly two years old, his mother moved with him to Los Angeles. He spent his formative years in

Compton, growing up in a musical household. His mom played the violin and his stepfather played the trombone. The sounds of jazz were a constant presence in his home. "Jazz music was always around," he says. "You know in my house, my stepdad, who I call my father, played the music, through the radio and his records." During his teens, Brandon started compiling his own now-massive collection of jazz albums (which he numbers at more than 30,000!).

"I remember one time I was playing a record by Lou Donaldson and my grandmother said you know, Lou Donaldson played at my club. I was, like, amazed. I said, really? Are you kidding? She said yeah, I have pictures of him being there. My coming into playing drums and music came from my love for listening to the records that she played, you know, and that I played, and my dad played."

A second major influence in his life was a social worker he met at the Boys and Girls Club in his neighborhood. He joined a program there in response to gang violence that left a lot of young people "in need of mentorship. I looked at the work she did and thought 'Man, I want to do this too!' I became a social worker because I like working with kids and teenagers. So now, I've been doing that since the late '90s."

And as if his life hasn't been full enough with music and mentoring, he prizes his days as a basketball player and coach. After playing for Mount San Antonio, a junior college near Los Angeles, he enrolled at the behest of his grandmother—actually, she did the enrolling for him—at the University of Kansas. While studying communications there, he overcame serious odds ("no one knew who I was") by becoming a walk-on practice player for the top-seeded team in the country. Among its players were future NBA stars Greg Ostertag and Rex Walters. He quickly gained a reputation as a dogged defender.

After getting his undergraduate degree in communications, he says, he saw an opportunity to apply for the Master's program in social work at Kansas. He dedicated himself to that field, first in Kansas for many years and then in New York, where he worked in the public and charter school systems before landing his current job at the Master School in Dobbs Ferry (where, in addition to his job as full-time counselor, he coaches basketball and tennis).

Eventually, his passion for music caught up with him. "After my basketball eligibility at Kansas, I was trying to figure out what to do," he says. "You know one thing about being a Pisces is you're always trying to find out what the next thing you can get into is. I just decided I wanted to learn how to do something else," he says. "So, at age 25, I dedicated myself to learning how to play drums, which came more naturally for me than the guitar and saxophone.

"All my friends thought I was crazy. They were like, man, you're never going to get better, you should stick to your day job. But I kept practicing and practicing. I was mostly self-taught, but a Kansas City drummer named Todd Strait, who used to play with Marian McPartland, took me under his wing. He turned me on to people like Philly Joe Jones. He would tell me, go listen to Art Blakey, listen to Max Roach."

After years of intense practice, he attained such a high level of proficiency that he was accepted at Boston's prestigious Berklee College of Music, where he formed friendships and musical associations with future jazz greats including **Warren Wolf**, trumpeter **Darren Barrett**, and drummer **Kendrick Scott**.

Sanders was so overwhelmed by Scott's playing, he wanted to quit playing the drums himself. "I called my grandmother collect to say I was moving back to Kansas City because I'd never be that

good,” he says. But as someone for whom no challenge is too great, he kept at it. He started playing in various bands at Boston clubs including Wally’s Jazz Cafe and the Wonder Bar, gaining experience and confidence.

In 2004, he moved to New York, where his friend the great drummer **Lewis Nash** invited him to stay with him in his Harlem apartment. Sanders, who now lives in the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn, began playing gigs with standout New Yorkers including pianist and organist Mike LeDonne and guitarist Peter Bernstein. He went on to accompany a long list of leading artists including **Joe Lovano, Jeremy Pelt, Esperanza Spalding, Walter Smith III, and Billy Pierce** while still “practicing, practicing, trying to develop my craft.”

When Wolf, “probably one of my biggest mentors,” encouraged Sanders to record an album, “I said, man, I don’t think that I’m ready. I don’t think that I’m ready. And he said, the only way you’re going to be ready is to do it. So finally, I said, man, I think I’m ready. I got the band together and we went into the studio.”

Fellow drummer **Willie Jones III**, who has produced Eric Reed, Cyrus Chestnut, and Gregory Tardy—and, it turns out, went to the same elementary school as Sanders—was tapped to produce **Compton’s Finest**. Asking Horn, a close friend of Sanders, to sing on it was a no-brainer. “I actually met her on Facebook back in 2010,” he says. “No one knew who she was back then, but a mutual friend said, well, there’s this young lady named Jazzmeia who’s going to the New School who is really good. So I messaged her and told her I had a gig that night. Would she be able to join us? She said yes.

“Well, she just floored everyone with her performance. We stayed in touch and sort of built a kind of big brother-little sister relationship. She said if you need me for anything, just let me know. After we recorded the album she said, look, if you want to tour once the record comes out, just let me know.”

Are there ways that his work as a jazz musician and a social worker coincide? “Jazz has always had a kind of spiritual quality,” he says. “I’m a heart person. I have a big heart, and when I play for people, it’s not about me. I want to lift people up.” •

## **Brandon Sanders: *Compton’s Finest***

(Savant Records)

**Street Date:** August 25, 2023

**Web Site:** <http://www.brandontheswingmansanders.com/>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/brandon.t.sanders.1>

**Instagram:** <https://www.instagram.com/bismyname213/>

Media Contact:

Terri Hinte

510-234-8781

[hudba@sbcglobal.net](mailto:hudba@sbcglobal.net)