

ERNIE WATTS

After hearing saxophonist Ernie Watts, it's easy to imagine that he possesses superhuman talents similar to those held by members of the fictional Fantastic Four. He breathes fire, can cool with ice, whip up a storm, and shape his sax sound in ways otherworldly. This is a powerful, yet sensitive, technically Herculean, yet human, complex yet elegantly beautiful player--no, a *marvel*. Nicholas F. Mondello / All About Jazz

Two-time Grammy Award winner **Ernie Watts** is one of the most versatile and prolific saxophone players on the music scene. In a diverse career that has spanned more than 40 years, he has been featured on over 500 recordings by artists ranging from **Cannonball Adderley** to **Frank Zappa**, always exhibiting his unforgettable trademark sound.

After 15 solo records for a variety of labels, large and small, Watts started **Flying Dolphin Records**, a company he runs with his wife Patricia. Flying Dolphin (distributed by Burnside Distribution Corp.) is a new chapter for the artist's creative expression. "Through my years of touring and recording," he says, "I've played in every kind of musical setting. I've reached a place in my life where I need to make music on my terms, and starting my own label provided me with a new sense of freedom."

That freedom can be readily heard on Watts' latest, "**FOUR plus FOUR**" (FD 1007), a collection of new Watts material that features both his U.S. and European quartets. Through joining his varied musical partners into a single vision, Watts inspires his friends to meld performances that firmly adhere to the artist's musical story. "Those classic Coltrane quartet recordings are at the heart of my writing and a source of energy I draw from on stage," says Watts. "This particular project gave me the opportunity to document my longtime Los Angeles quartet alongside my group in Germany, my parallel universe." Duties are split: each quartet has three tracks and one tune is shared by both. The Cologne sessions start with Watts' rhythmic "**Tributary**" and the second track (by pianist Christof Saenger), the impressionistic "**Crossings**." The players then follow Watts into his introspective waltz "**A Quiet Corner**" and move to Watts' travelogue "**Through My Window**," with his distinctive tenor as the link. On this track both quartets contribute from their respective homelands. The melody segues seamlessly from one session recorded nine months prior in Germany into a solid conclusion recorded at another time and another place with Watts' Los Angeles group, which also improvises over the European quartet in the center of the piece. The LA musicians round out the CD with two more originals, "**Wings of the Dreamer**" and the dynamic "**Find The Way**," plus a moving interpretation of the only cover, "**The Ballad of The Sad Young Men**."

Other releases in the Flying Dolphin catalog include "**To The Point**" (2007), recorded live with the Ernie Watts Quartet at The Jazz Bakery in Los Angeles and "**Analog Man**" (2006), recorded with his European quartet, together since 1999. "**Spirit Song**" (2005), was Watts' first studio recording as a leader since the release of "**Classic Moods**" (JVC) in 1999. The artist introduces the handmade wooden Spirit Flute on the title track, creating a haunting folk melody reprised on tenor. Flying Dolphin's first release was "**ALIVE**" (2004), recorded live in Germany. The chance to hear the artist at immediate heat in the midst of his own music is a special occasion, only available before to his concert audiences. "**To The Point**" and "**ALIVE**" both poignantly capture that live experience.

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Watts started playing saxophone at age 13. He went with a friend who was enrolling in the local school music program, and found himself carrying home an instrument as well. “I was a self-starter; no one ever had to tell me to practice,” remembers Watts. His discipline combined with natural talent began to shape his life. He won a scholarship to the Wilmington Music School in Delaware, where he studied classical music and technique. Though they had no jazz program, his mother provided the spark by giving him his own record player for Christmas and enrolling him in a record club. That first record club promotional selection turned out to be the brand-new Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue*. “When I first heard John Coltrane play, it was like someone put my hand into a light socket,” Watts says. He started to learn jazz by ear, often falling asleep at night listening to a stack of Coltrane records. Although he would enroll briefly at West Chester University in music education, he soon won a **Downbeat Scholarship** to the **Berklee College of Music** in Boston, renowned for jazz.

When Gene Quill quit **Buddy Rich’s** Big Band in Boston, trombonist Phil Wilson (an educator at Berklee), was asked to recommend a replacement; a young Ernie Watts got the job. He left Berklee for that important spot, staying with Rich from 1966-1968 and touring the world. Watts then moved to Los Angeles and began working in the big bands of **Gerald Wilson** and **Oliver Nelson**. With the Nelson band, Watts visited Africa on a U.S. State Department tour in 1969. They played in Chad, Niger, Mali, Senegal, and the Republic of the Congo, which included the opportunity to meet and jam with the local African musicians. Remembering the experience, Watts recalls Africa as “a timeless land.” “It was amazing to play a government sponsored concert in the evening, then take a walk the next morning and see a camel caravan coming in from the desert, laden with giant salt blocks. That had been happening for thousands of years! Walking out into the desert at night, I felt the tremendous quiet there, something I had never experienced before, or since.” It was also with Oliver Nelson that Watts had the occasion to record with the legendary **Thelonious Monk** on *Monk’s Blues* (Columbia).

During the 1970s and ‘80s, Watts was immersed in the busy production scene of Los Angeles. His signature sound was heard on countless TV shows and movie scores, almost all the early West Coast Motown sessions, and with pop stars such as Aretha Franklin and Steely Dan. Though the pop music genre placed narrow confines on his performance, the studio sessions allowed Watts the chance to constantly hone and refine his tone. After years in the studios, Watts’ passion for acoustic jazz never left him. At the end of a long day of sessions, he could frequently be heard playing fiery jazz in late-night clubs around Los Angeles.

In 1983, the film composer **Michel Colombier** wrote an orchestral piece entitled “Nightbird” for Watts. At the work’s inaugural performance at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, **Charlie Haden** came backstage to introduce himself. The meeting led to Watts performing with Haden’s **Liberation Music Orchestra**, and to tours with **Pat Metheny’s Special Quartet**, which included Haden.

Watts' tour with Metheny's group in the late 1980s found him on a triple bill with **Sun Ra** and the **Miles Davis Band** -- a turning point for the artist. "The serious energy of Pat's music convinced me to make the commitment to this level of performance. Every night I also absorbed Sun Ra and Miles and could not deny the power I was feeling in the music." Watts' charter membership in Haden's critically-acclaimed **Quartet West**, with whom he has toured and recorded for twenty-five years, and his body of work for the audiophile Japanese label JVC Music continued to demonstrate his talent for, and commitment to, jazz.

His four recordings for JVC Music are some of the finest of his extensive career. For these projects, he surrounded himself with several of his favorite players; Jack DeJohnette, Arturo Sandoval, Kenny Barron, Mulgrew Miller, Eddie Gomez, Jimmy Cobb and Marc Whitfield. The music encompassed both jazz classics and new pieces by Watts. Between his stint with JVC and starting his own label **Flying Dolphin**, Watts recorded *Reflections* with friend and fellow musician Ron Feuer. This 2003 duet release features serene ballads for saxophone and piano. He also recorded duet CDs with talented German pianist (and member of his European quartet) Christof Saenger for Laika Records, which now distributes Flying Dolphin in Germany.

Watts' eclectic mix of career activities includes current work with vocalist **Kurt Elling** in a tribute to John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman with string quartet. The project "**Dedicated To You**" (recorded live at Lincoln Center for Concord Records) earned Elling his first Grammy Award for **Best Jazz Vocal Album** in 2010. He has also taken part in **Jazz at the Kennedy Center** for **Billy Taylor** and recently appeared in Australia with **Billy Cobham** and orchestra. A typical year finds Watts touring Europe with his own quartet in spring and fall, in Asia as a featured guest artist and performing at summer festivals throughout North America and Europe, often with **Charlie Haden's Quartet West**. He gives back to the music by conducting student clinics and master classes. Watts has also compiled a collection of orchestral arrangements for guest soloist appearances with symphonies. And there is the occasional "hometown gig" with the **Ernie Watts Quartet** in California, where he is still based.

Summing it all up, Watts describes his ongoing journey. "I see music as the common bond having potential to bring all people together in peace and harmony. All things in the physical world have vibration; the music I choose to play is the energy vibration that touches a common bond in people. I believe that music is God singing through me, an energy to be used for good."

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All Flying Dolphin releases are available at Watts' concerts and the artist's website www.erniewatts.com (via CDBaby.com).

SOLO DISCOGRAPHY

Four Plus Four	Ernie Watts Quartet	Flying Dolphin (2009)
To The Point	Ernie Watts Quartet	Flying Dolphin (2007)
Analog Man	Ernie Watts Quartet	Flying Dolphin (2006)
Spirit Song	Ernie Watts Quartet	Flying Dolphin (2005)
ALIVE	Ernie Watts Quartet	Flying Dolphin (2004)
Reflections	Ernie Watts & Ron Feuer	Flying Dolphin (2003)
Classic Moods	Ernie Watts	JVC Music (1999)
The Long Road Home	Ernie Watts	JVC Music (1996)
Unity	Ernie Watts	JVC Music (1994)
Reaching Up	Ernie Watts	JVC Music (1993)
Stand Up	Ernie Watts	Odyssey (Singapore -1992)
Afoxé ("ah-foh-SHAY")	Ernie Watts w/Gilberto Gil	CTI (1991)
Ernie Watts w/Gamalon	Ernie Watts w/Gamalon	Amherst (1989)
The Ernie Watts Quartet	Ernie Watts Quartet	JVC Music (1987)
Sanctuary	Ernie Watts	Qwest/Warner Bros (1986)
Musican	Ernie Watts	Qwest/Warner Bros. (1985)
Chariots Of Fire	Ernie Watts	Qwest/Warner Bros. (1981)
Look In Your Heart	Ernie Watts	Elektra (1980)
The Wonder Bag	Ernie Watts Encounter	Vault (1972)
Come Together	Ernie Watts with Richard "Groove" Holmes	World Pacific Jazz (1970)
Planet Love	Ernie Watts	World Pacific Jazz (1969)