

Randy Weston and John Handy at the San Francisco Jazz Festival, April 19, 2003

by [Harry S. Pariser](#)

Set I



Any performance by Randy Weston is a special occasion. The late poet Langston Hughes described it best: "Weston's pianistics have an individuality all their own. When Randy plays, a combination of strength and gentleness, virility and velvet emerges from the keys in an ebb and flow of sound seemingly as natural as the waves of the sea." Born in 1926, Weston first came to notice during the 1950s, and has long been known for his interest in African music. He has performed in Africa and lived in Morocco. Randy's latest recording is "Kephra," named after the ancient Egyptian word meaning "transformation." It features Xiao-Fen on pipa and Pharoah Sanders on saxophone.

Known for his work with Charles Mingus and others, saxophonist and Bay Area resident John Handy is a formidable figure as well. So a Weston-Handy duet is an unforgettable occasion. Although they have played together on occasion, their appearance at the San Francisco Jazz

Festival in April marked their first public duet. As Randy Weston told Bayview Times reporter Wanda Sabir before the event: "John and I go way back. He played with me back in the '60s, after he left Charlie Mingus. He's my brother, he's family. When I come to San Francisco with the musicians, we stay at his house. John is very special, and when we get together, we just let the spirit take us."

And so they did. The 6' 7" Weston --a big, imposing man with large, wide hands -- towered over the smaller Handy. Handy appeared on stage with his head shaved; he wore a long, flowing shirt and dark sunglasses. Although best known for his alto saxophone playing, Handy played tenor as well for this concert. After playing together on several numbers, such as Hi-Fly, Little Nile and Mystery of Love, they each performed a solo number before joining forces again. At the start of his, John Handy explained that he was wearing his sunglasses both because they were "hip" and because "I usually closes my eyes while I play anyway." He then removed the sunglasses.

Because African music is so integral to his own work, Weston mentioned the recent passing of Babatunde Olatunji, the African drummer who almost singlehandedly had introduced African music to the United States with his recording "Drums of Passion." Weston dedicated "The Healers" to Olatunji, one of his inspirations. Preceding Weston and Handy was 71-year-old pianist Ray Bryant from Philadelphia, a Philly jazz icon whose blues-drenched, swinging style has only deepened with age. During his reign as house pianist at the Blue Note in Philadelphia during 1953, he played with the likes of Charlie Parker, Lester Young, and Miles Davis. Bryant has recorded with artists such as saxophonists Coleman Hawkins and Sonny Rollins. His set, although inspired, was more traditional than feel and scope than Weston and Handy's set. He performed classics such as "Take the A Train" John Lewis's "Django," "St. Louis Blues," "Moaning," and "Lotus Blossom."