

FEBRUARY 16, 2024 | FIRM NEWS

## Celebrating Black History Month

Black History Month is a time to recognize and honor the many contributions of Black Americans throughout U.S. history. Conn Maciel Carey LLP's Chief Operating Officer, [Mikel Koon](#), shares her dad's accomplishments as a jazz musician against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Era – a time when Black musicians battled for recognition – when he carved a path that would become a bridge between cultures and a beacon of resilience.

### Musical Career



Warren playing percussion.

Warren Smith is a disciplined New York-based drummer and percussionist with a long history of pitching in on various masterworks, from the recordings of soul queen [Aretha Franklin](#) to the avant-garde saxophone maverick and fascinating composer [Sam Rivers](#). Smith has also been a longtime member of one of the great percussion projects, the [Max Roach M'Boom](#) ensemble of drummers.

His reputation has always been that of a no-nonsense, hard-working, and dedicated performer, so he is a favorite working partner of bandleaders or composers who want to present projects with an absolute minimum of hassle or attitude from their collaborators. This list includes [Anthony Braxton](#), [Charles Mingus](#), [Henry Threadgill](#), [Van Morrison](#), [Count Basie](#), [Sam Rivers](#), [Tony Williams](#), and [Joe Zawinul](#). As each new generation of players enters the ever-developing world of jazz, Warren Smith has never been one to lord over newcomers or put up barriers against innovative jazz forms; on the contrary, he seems to always be part of the crew that is out front.

During the late-'70s/early-'80s "loft jazz" scene in New York City, his *Studio Wis* was one of the few so-called "lofts" that actually was a loft. It was also not a "pay-to-play" loft; in other words, rather than exploit the city's hungry musicians, [Smith](#) gave generously of his personal studio



Warren and his daughters in Cape May.

space so that talented newcomers to the New York City scene such as [Oliver Lake](#) and [Wadada Leo Smith](#) could present concerts without having to worry about outrageous rental fees. Warren Smith often attended these events, smiling wider as the music went further and further out, approaching the unknown players to pay compliments and offer advice. His work in studio sessions and Broadway pit bands made him a likely source of wisdom on all subjects related to sight reading, arranging, or composition. When a young guitarist in a group performing at *Studio Wis* asked for advice on sight-reading exercises after a gig in 1979, [Smith](#)'s response was typical of the man's generous nature. He strolled into a small office adjoining the performing space, and out of his own personal library of study material chose a superb book to give to the young musician as a gift: a copy of Louis Bellson's *Odd Time Reading Text*, one of the most helpful collections of sight-reading exercises ever published.

Although he does appear on records playing the drum set, [Smith](#) is just as often featured on any one of the many instruments from the formal orchestral percussion arsenal, from marimba to tympani, and don't forget glockenspiel. His vibraphone playing is so lauded that he was chosen to play the role of [Milt Jackson](#) in a group paying tribute to [the Modern Jazz Quartet](#). Many of his relationships were long-running, such as with fellow drummer Roach, or with arranger and big band leader [Gil Evans](#), whose use of [Smith](#), on instruments such as marimba on 1957 dates with trumpeter [Miles Davis](#), are among the percussionist's earliest significant recording credits.

When Evans kicked off a hot performing and recording unit of his own in the '70s, emphasizing modern directions, utilizing electric instruments, and even recording a tribute to acid rock maestro [Jimi](#)




Warren celebrating his retirement from teaching at the State University of New York at Old Westbury.

[Hendrix](#), [Smith](#) was the percussionist of choice utilized in many intriguing arrangements. Jazz listeners who hadn't done their research may have assumed [Smith](#)'s knowledge of the experimental rock of the '60s was fleeting, but in reality, he was one of the musicians involved in the original [Earth Opera](#) band and recording, putting [Smith](#) in the company of super bluegrass pickers [Peter Rowan](#) and [David Grisman](#) back when they were greenhorns.

In the '90s, [Smith](#) began recording and performing regularly with [Bill Cole](#)'s Untempered Ensemble, also featuring the brilliant instrument inventor Cooper Moore. [Smith](#)'s solo album, released in 1998, entitled [Cats Are Stealing My ---](#), was received with great enthusiasm by critics, many of whom called it his most fully realized work to date. ~ Eugene Chadbourne, All Music Guide.

### Interesting Facts

- Entered the professional music world at fourteen
  - Roots grounded in the Chicago south side music scene
  - Played Birdland in 1959 with Gil Evans
  - Played on all of the Gladys Knight and the Pips' 45 hit singles
  - Performed with Dionne Warwick
  - Performed on live TV, toured and recorded with Harry Belafonte
  - Played with Nat King Cole on 1964 summer tour of New England
  - Toured with Barbra Streisand throughout the S. in 1965
  - As part of the ABC New York staff orchestra in 1964-67, played on the Jimmy Dean Show and the Les Crane/Nipsey Russell Show
  - Musical Director for Janis Joplin in 1969 playing the Ed Sullivan Show, the San Francisco Ice Palace and her only European tour
  - Performed on live TV, recorded and toured with Aretha Franklin from 1965-1978
- Performed, toured and recorded with every  progressive from Charles Mingus to Miles Davis, From Muhal Richard Abrams to Sam Rivers, Max Roach, M'Boom, Jabbo Ware, David Murray, Sonny Sharock, Anthony Davis and many other masters of the music. Warren revealing his book "Crossing Borders and Playing with Pioneers: My Life In Music."

### About Warren Smith

Warren Smith – born May 14, 1934, in Chicago, IL – was born into a musical family. His father played saxophone and clarinet with [Noble Sissle](#) and [Jimmie Noone](#), and his mother was a harpist and pianist. He studied clarinet under his father from age four. He graduated from the [University of Illinois](#) in 1957, then took a Masters in Percussion at the [Manhattan School of Music](#) in 1958.

In 1961, [Smith](#) was a founding member of the Composers Workshop Ensemble, a New York based co-operative group dedicated to performing original jazz compositions by its membership. In his later years, he taught as a professor at *SUNY at Old Westbury*, and headed up his own medium-sized ensemble entitled the Wistet.

For more information about Warren Smith and his musical journey, check out his recently published book titled "[Crossing Borders and Playing with Pioneers](#)," available on Amazon.