

An inspired eclectic, Don Byron has performed an array of musical styles with great success. Byron first attained a measure of notoriety for playing Klezmer, specifically the music of the late Mickey Katz. While the novelty of a black man playing Jewish music was enough to grab the attention of critics, it was Byron's jazz-related work that ultimately made him a major figure. Byron is an exceptional clarinetist from a technical perspective; he also possesses a profound imagination that best manifests itself in his multifarious compositions. At heart, Byron is a conceptualist. Each succeeding album seems based on a different stylistic approach, from the free jazz/classical leanings of his first album, *Tuskegee Experiments* (Nonesuch, 1992), to the hip-hop/funk of *Nu Blaxpoitation* (Blue Note, 1998). Byron's composition "There Goes the Neighborhood" was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet and premiered in London in 1994. He's also composed for silent film, served as the director of jazz for the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and scored for television. Byron was born and raised in New York City, the son of a mailman who also occasionally played bass in calypso bands, and a mother who dabbled on piano. As a child, Byron developed asthma; his doctor suggested he take up a wind instrument as therapy. Byron chose clarinet. His South Bronx neighborhood had a sizeable Jewish population, which partly explains his fascination with Klezmer. Byron was encouraged by his parents to learn about all different kinds of music, from Leonard Bernstein to Dizzy Gillespie. Byron's models on clarinet included Tony Scott, Artie Shaw, and especially Jimmy Hamilton. As an improviser, Joe Henderson was a prominent influence. As a teenager, Byron studied clarinet with Joe Allard. Byron attended the New England Conservatory of Music, where he studied with George Russell. While at NEC, Byron was recruited to play in Hankus Netsky's Klezmer Conservatory Band. Byron moved from Boston back to New York in the mid-'80s, where he began playing with several of the city's more prominent jazz avant-gardists, including David Murray, Craig Harris, and Hamiet Bluiett. A year after recording *Tuskegee Experiments*, Byron made *Plays the Music of Mickey Katz* (Nonesuch), which put something of an end to his Klezmer career (at least in terms of recording). Byron's career built steadily over the course of the '90s. By the end of the decade he had signed with Blue Note records. While hardly a radical, Byron is an original voice within the bounds of whatever style he happens to embrace.