

Brandon Woody refined his songs in shows around his hometown Baltimore and channeled the city's lessons on his debut album, "For the Love of It All."



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By Ayana Contreras

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"To get here, it hasn't been a yellow brick road. Even now, it's not no damn yellow brick road," the trumpeter and composer Brandon Woody said on a video call from a Fort Myers, Fla., hotel room. It was mid-March and Woody, 26, was in between tour stops supporting Luther S. Allison. In the weeks leading up to the release of his first album as a bandleader, his eyes glimmered with vigor.

The road he spoke of was both metaphorical and literal. Woody has earned a fortunate position among 20-something peers like Allison and the Toronto electro-jazz group BadBadNotGood (with whom he toured this spring). To get there he traveled a serpentine, sometimes-rocky path through institutionalized jazz education that has, for others, been a prerequisite for obtaining a record deal with a grande dame of jazz labels. It took him from Boston to Stockton, Calif. to New York, in search of a breakthrough that he eventually got — in his hometown, Baltimore.

"I'm always going to be a little bit jagged around the edges," he said of his music. "You're going to hear my struggles, but you're also going to hear my celebrations and my successes. This is a homegrown thing, and it's going to stay that."



“I’m always going to be a little bit jagged around the edges,” Woody said. Kyle Myles for The New York Times

On Friday, Blue Note Records will release “For the Love of It All,” an album he and his Baltimore-based band Upendo (Swahili that translates roughly to “love”) honed not in the studio, but in front of audiences, primarily in his hometown. At club performances over the past half decade, fans would find ways to request songs that had never been recorded and weren’t yet titled. “People would remember the songs and be like, ‘Yo, when are you going to do,’ — and just sing it because they know the melody,” Woody recalled.

The multidisciplinary artist and fellow-Baltimore native Nia June helped title some of the tracks that appear on his album. After “telling her about the story line and what the songs meant to me,” he explained, she worked to synthesize the ideas as

titles. June, a filmmaker, poet and writer who has worked with Woody extensively since 2020, described the common thread of artists in the city: They are “brave, real and radically vulnerable.” She added, “The people here possess an unnatural resiliency — an unashamed, relentless will to survive. And with style.”

Picking up the trumpet in elementary school, Woody remembers that he would always get butterflies before playing. “It was an attraction or a positive nervousness because I wanted to do it so much,” he said.

But some of that enchantment was tempered by frustration, first at Baltimore School of Arts, where he said that outside of the high school’s jazz combo, budding musicians were relegated to studying “all this different European music, Gregorian chant,” but not Black music. At 14, when he wasn’t selected for the combo, Woody responded by forming Just Us Jazz with his then-classmate Troy Long. Long would eventually become Upendo’s keyboardist and Woody’s key collaborator.

“We tried to play around the city,” Woody said. “Of course it was kind of unguided. We just were so young and we just had so much energy and we all were fiery. You could see the energy coming off of our bodies.”

A jam session held in the back of a pizzeria in the Mount Vernon neighborhood brought an encounter with Theljon Allen, a touring trumpeter based in Baltimore who would sometimes join in with the young band. “We would shed and we would just play free,” Woody said.



At 14, when Woody wasn't selected for his high school's jazz combo, he formed a band that gigged around Baltimore. Kyle Myles for The New York Times

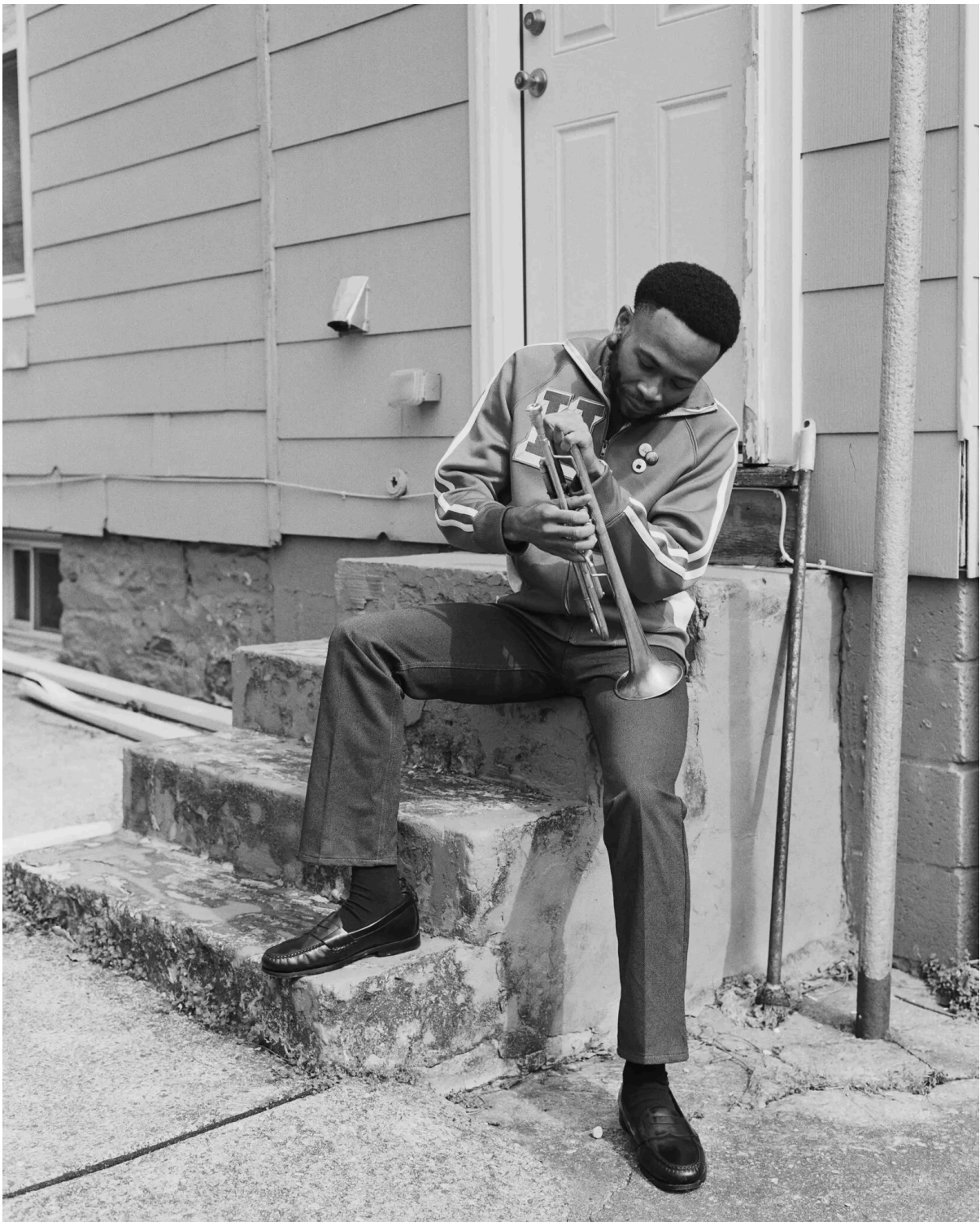
Woody made a name for himself, earning a scholarship to a summer performance intensive at Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he met the drummer and composer Terri Lyne Carrington, and befriended contemporaries such as the pianist Julius Rodriguez, the trombonist Jeffery Miller, and the saxophonist Yesseh Furaha-Ali.

After high school, he studied under Ambrose Akinmusire at the Brubeck Institute, in Stockton, Calif., where Woody roomed with the saxophonist Isaiah Collier and was exposed to an ear training system taught by the vibraphonist Stefon Harris. "That really changed the way I think about harmony," he said. The distance opened up new sounds and approaches outside of what he'd experienced at home.

“As soon as I was 18,” he said with a bright flash of appreciation in his voice, “I got to go farther than light,” a whole new world of possibility thousands of miles away from Baltimore. Yet he was still homesick.

When Harris was appointed director of Jazz Arts at the Manhattan School of Music the next year, in 2018, Woody transferred there. In New York, the community of musicians held more allure than working toward a degree: Woody was focused in music classes and, in particular, enamored with studying under the trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater. Woody remembered, “He told me so many stories about life and about being Black and playing this music.” But he rarely made it down the street to Columbia University for his academic classes. By spring 2018, he had lost his scholarship and was on his way back to Baltimore.

“But this is where my real story begins,” he said. “When I dropped out of college and I moved back, it was crazy. I got scammed. I was broke.” But he also began to truly cultivate his artistic practice and voice.



“Baltimore artists are brave, real and radically vulnerable,” said Nia June, a multidisciplinary artist who helped title the tracks on Woody’s album. Kyle Myles for The New York Times

Settling into the high-ceilinged first floor apartment in a brownstone in the Mid-Town Belvedere neighborhood, Woody made two important discoveries. The first was how perfect his new place was as a practice space. “The trumpet sound was so good in there. It was a very reverberating room.”

The second was a neighbor. About a block away from Woody's place on the corner of St. Paul and East Biddle lived his old high school bandmate, Troy Long. "He texted me, 'Bro, I live here now. You should come through,'" Long said. "And I was living around the corner. I was like, 'Bro, I'm right here. I'll pull up.'"

Not long after, the pair started working on "Real Love, Pt. 1," the first single from the new album. It's a punchy, propulsive 7-minute-long exercise in elation. "That was actually the first tune that we wrote together," Long remembered.

Reunited, they reestablished the kinetic, inventive energy of their high school gigging. But they also began to clarify their process, with Woody often starting things off with a melody and Long shaping the song's structure through chords. Other times, Woody starts with an idea about chord progression "and I'll just fully flesh them out, or add some extensions to give it a full picture kind of situation," Long explained.

At a monthly gig at An die Musik Live!, a nearby hall and listening room that is a stalwart of the local live music scene, the pair rounded out Upendo's lineup with the bassist Mike Saunders and the drummer Quincy Phillips, who played with Roy Hargrove.



Woody toured with Solange's band in 2019 and appeared in campaigns for Saucony and Calvin Klein when the pandemic halted performances. Kyle Myles for The New York Times

The album's second single, "Wisdom; Terrace on St. Paul St.," a rollicking, cinematic track punctuated by dramatic cymbal crashes, began its life titled simply as "Wisdom" until Woody decided to emphasize the location where he fellowshiped with band members, and where he says he "really got my chops." "I just wanted to talk about how important it was for me to drop out of college when I did, to move back to Baltimore, to have my own crib and to be living two blocks from Troy, to meet Quincy Phillips, to meet Michael Saunders. That terrace on St. Paul Street was more like a fire escape, but that street, it means a lot to me."

Even as Woody was asserting his own musical direction in jam sessions and shows around Baltimore, he was pulled for stretches out of his creative cocoon. In 2019, he joined Solange on a leg of her tour in support of her album "When I Get Home."

During the pandemic, when in-person performances halted, he modeled for Saucony and Calvin Klein. The clothing brand's campaign was featured on a billboard in his neighborhood.

Finding his role in idiosyncratic band configurations like the Solange tour or with BadBadNotGood has been a lesson in "self-preservation," he said. Working to balance "doing what's needed while simultaneously being my unfiltered self, even through other people's music."

On "For the Love of It All," Woody does not need to strike such compromise. "The real heart and grit of the city, the struggles that you come through, that all gets put in the music without really even being cognizant of it," Long said. "But then when you are older and you reflect on those experiences, you realize you've been carrying that with you the whole time."

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