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## Marcus Belgrave Named 2009 Kresge Eminent Artist

By [Lee Mergner](#)

The Kresge Foundation, in conjunction with Kresge Arts in Detroit, announced that jazz trumpeter Marcus Belgrave is the 2009 Kresge Eminent Artist. That award also comes with a \$50,000 prize. The Detroit-based Belgrave has gotten a lot of awards and grants over the years, but he told JT that this one was special. "It's one I didn't expect, that's for sure." It turns out that he knew he had been nominated, but after attending a gathering of various artists in the running for the award, he ruled himself out. "I saw so many gifted artists of all genres, not just music, so I didn't think I had a chance."



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Marcus Belgrave



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Marcus Belgrave

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The Kresge Eminent Artist Award recognizes an exceptional artist in the visual, performing, or literary arts for his or her professional achievements and contributions to the cultural community, and encourages that individual's pursuit of a chosen art form as well as an ongoing commitment to Metropolitan Detroit. The award is unrestricted and is given annually to one artist who has lived and worked in Wayne, Oakland, or Macomb Counties for a significant number of years. The first-ever Kresge Eminent Artist Award was presented last year to Detroit visual artist Charles McGee. The Eminent Artist Award is administered by the College for Creative Studies. The award recipient is selected by an independent review panel composed of prominent artists and arts professionals from the Detroit area.

Michelle Perron, director of Kresge Arts in Detroit, acknowledged that Belgrave was a natural choice for the award in its second year. "The award recognizes someone who has exemplified outstanding achievement in the arts field, as well as contributed to the Detroit area community. His impact in this community has been so outstanding for many years, not only as a musician but also as an educator." She confirmed that there are no strings to the award. "This award recognizes his lifelong work and commitment."

Belgrave himself attributes the award to his lifelong devotion to education in the community. "They knew that if they gave the money to me that I'm going to keep on doing what I been doing." Indeed, Belgrave has been dedicated to teaching jazz to young people, both informally and formally, since around 1970.

Born and raised in Chester, Pa., Belgrave has been a fixture of the Detroit music community since he settled there in 1963. He told JT that he had his eye on the city for many years. "I was very close with Clifford Brown, who lived in Wilmington, Delaware, not far from me. He became my first mentor. I was trying to play jazz but, you know, I didn't know what I was doing. He wrote out my first solo for me, for 'How High the Moon.' Yes, he opened up my ears." Belgrave simply couldn't imagine someone playing the trumpet better than Brown (a sentiment matched by many a trumpet player, past and present). "But these other guys would tell me, 'Oh yea? There's a guy in Detroit who plays circles around Clifford.' I thought to myself, 'Who was this guy?' It turned out to be Thad Jones. So I knew that Detroit had a real strong music scene. I got to know him later when I was with Ray Charles and he was with Count Basie."

Performing with Ray Charles for almost four years was a watershed experience for Belgrave, who had met

Charles in Wichita, Kansas and sat in with the band. But it wasn't until Charles had a three-week engagement in the Chester area that Belgrave was asked to join the band. "The last night he was there, he called me in to be a part of the band, because the trumpet player had had enough," said Belgrave, laughing. Several years later, Belgrave would have a similar feeling. But he doesn't harbor any ill feelings about his tenure with the great singer. "Those were beautiful days." When he left Charles' band he wanted to find a place where he could make a living without being on the road for months at a time. It was around 1962 and the Motown label was in full swing. Belgrave did sessions with the label and when that work dried up, he started looking for other outlets for his talents. "I had worked so hard and lived so hard, I was ready to settle down."

His conversion to the field of jazz education came in 1970, during a difficult time physically. He had been ill in the hospital and when he was released, he had some time on his hands without an instrument. "The doctor told me, 'I know you're not going to give up playing, but you have to give it up for at least three months.' I lasted two! But it was during that time that I started teaching. And I took to it. It seemed like a natural thing to hook up with talented kids." Talented they were. Among his students are some of the most accomplished players on the contemporary jazz scene, including Geri Allen, Regina Carter, James Carter, Bob Hurst, Rodney Whitaker and Kenny Garrett, all of whom are quick to publicly acknowledge their debt to their mentor. In an [Overdue Ovation profile](#) of Belgrave in JT in 1994, Regina Carter told Jim Dulzo that Belgrave had and continues to have a unique relationship with his former students. "He is like baby's milk," Carter explained. "He's like a nutrient, like a parent. It was just so important to us as young people to really get a firm grasp on the music and come to it in a way that is fun and enjoyable."

It's clear in talking with Belgrave about his former students that he gets much pride and pleasure from the relationships. Belgrave said about Garrett that, "He asked more questions than any other student. He's always trying to learn more. Did you know that he learned Japanese and now he's learning Chinese? Oh lord. At one point he was working with Miles and he would call me up and ask me for advice. I told him, "You're playing with Miles Davis—ask him!"

During the '70s, Belgrave worked as a musician and teacher with the late Harold McKinney and his organization Metropolitan Arts, but eventually formed his own organization, the Jazz Development Workshop, where many of the aforementioned artists got their early jazz training. Belgrave felt that his program made a difference in the city. "It was a positive thing for Detroit. There are a lot of dedicated teachers in the city—like Ernie Rogers and Dan Pruitt. But it seems like the schools are in such a state of decline, they just don't get a chance." Belgrave himself never taught formally in the Detroit school system, preferring to work on his own with students who wanted to learn from a master. Looking back on his teaching experiences, Belgrave attributed whatever impact he had on the students to the simple message that he delivered. "I let them know that they can really play. I think they knew it anyway. But I found that I was able to impart my own knowledge, direction and guidance to them."

I asked him if he ever regretted settling in Detroit, where he became known more as an educator than as a musician. "No, no. I spent a year and a half in New York City. I worked and played with so many greats. I played on records with Mingus and Donald Byrd. I was in contact with all the musicians. I put in my dues. But it's a hectic place. You can get in trouble there!"

In addition to his work as an educator in the Detroit music community, Belgrave also teaches jazz at Oberlin College, along with Wendell Logan, Gary Bartz, Robin Eubanks and Dan Wall. He enjoys teaching to these college kids who likely are very different from the inner city kids Belgrave has mentored over the years. "They seem to like my approach there." He laments that he doesn't get to spend more time with his fellow professors, who tend to come to the campus for different 2-3 days stretches. And Belgrave continues to be active as a performing musician. He recently toured with his wife, singer Joan Belgrave, in a show dedicated to Louis Armstrong. He performs and records regularly in the Detroit area and is a founding member of the Detroit Jazz Musicians Co-Op. Recently, Belgrave represented Detroit as part of the Lincoln Center Motor City Jazz Masters tribute which included Yusef Lateef, Curtis Fuller, Charles McPherson, and Ron Carter.

Belgrave has no concrete plans for using the money from the award. He does want to explore the music of his

family's roots in Barbados. And he's looking forward to doing the [2010 Jazz Party at Sea](#), which will make stops in the Caribbean, not far from his family's origins. "I want to see if that music is still in my blood."

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