

JOHN ABBOTT



RANDY BRECKER

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Trumpeter Randy Brecker is well known for working in various genres and with such artists as Stevie Wonder, Parliament-Funkadelic, Frank Zappa, Lou Reed, Bruce Springsteen, Dire Straits, Blue Öyster Cult, Blood, Sweat & Tears, Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Billy Cobham, Larry Coryell, Jaco Pastorius and Charles Mingus. He worked a lot with his brother, tenor saxophonist Michael Brecker, and formed The Brecker Brothers band. Growing up in Philadelphia, he studied with Sigmund Hering and Tony Marchione and later with Bill Adam at Indiana University before moving to New York.

The New York City Jazz Record: You've always been known as an artist who performs in various genres. Coming from Philadelphia, you were surrounded by different kinds of music live and on the radio and given your father's influence, you were immersed in music from a young age. Talk about your early days.

Randy Brecker: Going back to the beginning, my dad was a semi-professional pianist and an avid bebop fan and being from Philly, which was a great town for every style of music, I got to hear a lot of different things. At home it was mostly jazz and he had jam sessions on the weekends. He would also take me to hear music quite a bit when I was really young. In New Jersey there was the Red Hill Inn and I heard Miles [Davis] there with Cannonball [Adderley], Red Garland, Philly Joe [Jones] and Paul Chambers, which was a thrill, just sitting right up at the front and that close. Also, Dave Brubeck, Carmen McRae, Maynard's [Ferguson] Big Band, that was amazing. Clifford Brown was on the scene in Philly with Max Roach, so they played there a lot. At a young age I just loved the music.

Besides that, I took lessons from Sigmund Hering, who was in the Philadelphia Orchestra, so I was exposed to that. There was also an avid R&B scene. I used to listen to the radio before I went to sleep and right past the jazz station was an R&B station. I was a little older when I happened upon that one night and I heard the theme song, "Night Train" by Jimmy Forrest. The sound just got me. I started listening and heard James Brown, Little Stevie Wonder, who was like 12 or something at the time, so I was around that age — I forget if I'm older or younger, I actually played with him for a while back in 1973. Philly had an R&B history with the record labels Cameo-Parkway and later Gamble & Huff and then Philly International. A lot of local talent became famous in that realm and a lot of those guys behind the scenes were all jazz guys. So I caught on kind of early, as a teenager — by then I was playing for a few years, I started when I was eight — that there were avenues to kind of package yourself as a jazz musician to appeal to a wider audience, quite frankly. Not that long ago I researched what happened to a lot of the musicians that I heard, not only the well known ones, there were lesser known guys like Buddy Savitt and John Bonnie, great saxophonists, and there was a wonderful bebop vibes player named Vince

Montana. Behind the scenes, they were on all these pop and R&B records that came out on Cameo-Parkway, like Chubby Checker. You know George Young, who I got to know really well on the New York studio scene. He was popular on the scene as a virtuoso saxophonist. He actually appeared on Ed Sullivan, you can see it on his website. So, all these things became an early influence, a potpourri of different styles of music.

There was a plethora of Hammond B3 players that also grew out of Philadelphia. So I ended up playing with a lot of organ trios in various clubs around Philly when I became a little older and of age. [Saxophonist] Clarence C Sharp was nice enough to let me sit in with his group; he played on Lee Morgan's first couple records. So I got involved with the local scene when I was maybe 15 with people like [saxophonist] Lew Tabackin, who was a little bit older. There was a wonderful drummer named Jimmy DePriest, who started a youth band. He later became a well known classical conductor. There were just so many great musicians. Later I studied with Tony Marchione, who taught Lee Morgan. They were really compatriots. They both went to Mastbaum Vocational Technical High School [at] which so many great musicians trained: The Heath Brothers, McCoy [Tyner], Benny Golson... You know, there's another story I like to tell: when Art Blakey was looking for a band, he had Benny and when [he] was looking for a trumpet player, Benny suggested Lee [Morgan] and in turn suggested Jymie Merritt on bass and Bobby Timmons on piano together — they all went to high school together, you know? Giants in the field. So it was an incredible place to be from. The people were serious about music in Philly and they still are, really. There were a lot of brother combinations too, whatever that means: Kenny and Bill Barron, The Heath Brothers, us, Tommy and Ray Bryant and there's a whole list, Billy and Frankie Root...

On the rock and pop side there were guys around town that became famous: Frankie Avallone became known as Frankie Avalon; he was a jazz trumpet player who went to school with Lew Tabackin and was maybe discovered by Dick Clark, who was also there; *American Bandstand* was born in Philadelphia and they would discover local talent. Another young guy who was a compatriot of Pat Martino, I forget his Italian name but he became known as Bobby Rydell as a singer. He was also a damn good jazz drummer. So, there were all these connections between jazz and rock and pop. Eventually I backed up Bobby Rydell in Wildwood one summer when I was a little older. So, there were all these weird connections. Billy Paul just passed away, jazz singer, but he became known on Gamble & Huff with his big hit, "Me and Mrs. Jones". He had a great trio, including my brother backing him up, just playing the local clubs with local Philly guys until he hit it big. So there are all these cross-connections between jazz, pop and rock. So I just grew up with all this stuff. I always thank our dad for bringing us in to that world. Philly was just undeniably a great place with a history

of so many great musicians.

TNYCJR: Then you moved to New York and there was so much work it seems like a fairy tale.

RB: I came to New York in the late '60s and caught the tail-end of the classic studio days. So I was really in the right place at the right time. Marvin Stamm, Joe Shepley and Burt Collins used me as a sub for some studio dates and I got involved in the classic studio when everybody was there at the same time, wearing suits and ties, you know? Eventually rock and R&B started to kind of encroach into the studio system so

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everyone started wearing dashikis, long hair, jeans and whatever. The advent of rock 'n' roll and pop taking over also increased the amount of work that there was because now all the studios were right where the pop music was and there were a lot of people making records. The whole thing changed, so I was there to witness that. But I was lucky to work under people like Oliver Nelson... You'd show up back then and the piano player might be Herbie Hancock and the next trumpet player over working on a Coca Cola jingle might be Thad Jones or somebody. So it was a real thrill. We were all working sometimes as many as 15 sessions a week. I was also writing for Atlantic Records and doing charts for people like Chaka Khan, George Benson and Diana Ross. It was just an exciting time.

TNYCJR: Why was there so much more work from the late '60s-'80s and how has the work changed?

RB: It's changed drastically because of technology. Back in those days, if you wanted a sound of any kind you needed to hire a musician. As soon as technology came in, sampling and keyboards, MIDI and digital stuff, that all flew out the window. I remember, sometime in the '80s, I was called by Jonathan Elias. He had a studio and a jingle company with his brother. I used to work for them a lot. He had me come in alone and play some high Cs and some low Cs, some chromatic scales and some staccato notes, some long tones and I said, "What are we doing?" He said, "Oh, it's for an experimental film." I didn't even know the word yet, but obviously what he was doing was sampling me. And that's the last I ever saw of him. Sessions started to have one real trumpet and three fake trumpets. Eventually they had no trumpets. Consumers got used to that sound; they didn't even know it was machines doing everything. So work eventually just dropped off completely by I'd say the early '90s. It felt like it happened overnight. Musicians that didn't have anything else going were really caught by that and either dropped out of the business entirely or did something else. A good friend of mine who was very active writing jingles ended up flying helicopters, others went into teaching jobs. I was lucky that we had this other career playing live, my brother and I, so we got more into that. We'd built a name for ourselves as players. Even during all the busy studio years we were going out on the road as Brecker Brothers, or with Hal Galper or with various artists. Now there's not only no studio work, there's no studios. The last of the larger studios, Avatar, formerly The Power Station, was just bought by Berklee. Their intent, so they say, is to open a Berklee in New York and have a performance center in there and also a studio that they can rent out and have their people running it. It remains to be seen what is going to happen with that because the union wants Berklee to hire people that were already working there. They're at odds. We'll see how that all pans out. It's kind of the height of irony that Berklee bought that studio and they'll have students in there when there are no other studios – they'll be learning to be engineers but, not that there aren't any studios, they're all very small and it's usually file sharing. But that's literally the last large studio left in New York, as hard as that is to believe. One by one they all just closed.

TNYCJR: Speaking of small studios and file sharing, you and lots of people record long-distance, so to speak, right? You record at home and share files online?

RB: Yeah, we do a lot of that. It's the way a lot of records are made. Another part of the equation is that nothing really sells anywhere near like it used to, because people can get millions of tunes by streaming and the musicians that make those records get a very minimal royalty. Artists are trying to figure out a new

business model. People don't want to pay for music anymore. That's a big problem.

TNYCJR: Is the union active in that fight?

RB: They're active, but they kind of were behind the times and dropped the ball on a lot of this stuff. This could have been put in contracts or there was a way to word things that would probably not allow all this stuff to happen, or at least lessen it. They just don't have enough power, you know? The record companies are iTunes and Apple. They run the business.

TNYCJR: You've been working much more overseas over time, especially in Europe?

RB: There's a greater respect for tradition and this thing we call jazz, which was born here. In Europe they have a longer attention span and the arts are well funded in various countries. People respect art and musicians a lot more than they do here. They're not living in quite the digital world that we do here, although that is changing over there. But, particularly Eastern Europe, which was oppressed for so long, there are avid jazz fans there. I tour Russia quite a bit with the great Igor Butman, who is a great spokesman for jazz and a wonderful tenor saxophonist. I've traveled the Siberian Express with him all the way to Vladivostok and there are a lot of jazz fans and amazing musicians in Russia and in Eastern Europe, Bulgaria, Poland in particular. You can tour around Poland for two or three weeks, hitting various concert halls and clubs, which you used to be able to do in the U.S. but you can't anymore. So I go over there quite a bit to various countries. I just did a nice jazz festival in Kazakhstan and I also go to Japan and the Pacific Rim a lot. Going in a couple weeks to China and that's an up-and-coming so-called market. The Brecker Brothers went there in the early '90s and there were virtually no jazz musicians. Now you go and there are hundreds of jazz programs in the schools and some really great Chinese jazz musicians, so that's going to be a fertile place to work in the upcoming years.

TNYCJR: You have the "Electric Miles" engagement at Iridium coming up. Who put that together?

RB: That's an old friend of mine, Milan Simich. I'm doing a couple things for him this year. You can probably go on the website and see exactly who's playing, but I think it's [drummer] Steve Smith, myself, Paul Bollenback on guitar, Greg Osby on alto, Lonnie Plaxico on bass and two other guitars—he wanted three guitars because at one point, I guess, Miles had three guitars. That should be a fun gig. We've done it with different personnel. The last time we had a really good time because it was two trumpets with Jeremy Pelt and we decided to do music from Miles' early period, electrified. So we did some standards from *Relaxin'* and *Workin'* with all of our effects. It was kind of a cuckoo thing to do but it was a lot of fun. So anything could happen on this gig.

TNYCJR: And then you have two new recordings?

RB: The main one, we're just putting the finishing touches on it now, is a collaboration with the NDR Big Band from Hamburg, Germany, who work for the huge TV and radio station over there—in Germany they have, how many are left? Four, what they call "radio bands" that work for the networks. So they're fully funded and they get to do a lot of great projects. I've done some with most of them now: the WDR Big Band, I have a record out with the Danish Radio Big Band with strings, which came out really good. This one will be great. We've done a couple tours playing this material. A guy named Jörg Achim Keller did a great job arranging my compositions from different periods.

He has an extended woodwind section utilizing double reeds you usually don't find in a big band. The regular sax section is there, but it's four or five extra woodwind players added for texture. We have Dave Sanborn sitting in on three tunes and my wife, Ada Rovatti, playing Mike's old parts on some of the tunes, so we have kind of the original horn section and it just came out really well. They're in the throes of mixing things now. So that should be out some time next year. ❖

For more information, visit randybrecker.com. Brecker is at Iridium Nov. 24th-26th with *Electric Miles*. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Randy Brecker – *Score* (Solid State, 1968)
- The Eleventh House – *Introducing the Eleventh House with Larry Coryell* (Vanguard, 1972)
- The Brecker Brothers – *Brecker Bros.* (Arista-Novus, 1975)
- Randy Brecker – *In The Idiom* (Denon, 1986)
- Horace Silver – *A Prescription for the Blues* (Impulse, 1997)
- Randy Brecker (with Danish Radio Big Band) – *The Jazz Ballad Song Book* (Half Note-Red Dot, 2010)

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years time that music will be there for people to discover. Of course it's not only me, it's all the guys I'm playing with too. They're reaping the benefits of having CDs to sell on gigs and it's documenting their playing as well. I really appreciate what Trevor's doing."

Gjerstad, who has some 40 releases on FMR, echoes this view. "When I first got in contact with Trevor, he was very quick in accepting my suggestion, perhaps because it involved drummer Terje Isungset. Trevor also plays drums and is very interested in what other drummers are up to. After that, he never said no to any of my suggestions. So I know there would be an opening for me at FMR if other labels say no. I do go to other labels as well because it's important to go through various distribution networks in order to reach other audiences."

With the CD now in decline Taylor has had to adapt his model. "There used to be a time when, if someone approached us and it was interesting and you thought you could sell enough, we'd take the project on. But now in the 21st century you cannot do that anymore, because you will not make enough money to cover your expenses. Now you have to say, yes we can do this but it's going to have to be a cooperative venture." FMR and the artist split the costs and the output 50/50, with the artist being responsible for promotion while the record company has to recoup its investment through the website or via a diminishing band of distributors. Taylor goes on: "You know that with a free improv record the sales will be tiny. But the artists can sell more on gigs, which is the primary use of CDs now."

Is it sustainable? Taylor remains optimistic: "We'll carry on for now and we'll see what happens. For me it's important because if you take away culture, the artistic heights humanity can get to, then life becomes almost pointless and incredibly dark. So for those things not to be affected by commercialism is worth so much in other ways that we have to nurture them. That's what I do with FMR and what I do when I go out playing music, trying to put up a flag, even into a strong wind, to be defiant to say: this is great. I've been a musician all my life. I know this music is great and has so much to offer people if only you can help them get there." ❖

For more information, visit fmr-records.com. Artists performing this month include Matthew Shipp at The Stone Nov. 1st and João Lencastre at Drom. Nov. 21st. See Calendar.