

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 February 2019 15:26 - Last Updated Friday, 22 February 2019 16:49



"*Music is a mystery,*" laughs the Philly horn maestro **Randy Brecker**, talking to me from deepest Germany. Given that he's been playing the trumpet for 65 years, since he was eight, and is revered as a master of his chosen instrument, that might seem like a curious thing to say, but Brecker is in a philosophical mood and reveals that musicians, even great ones like him, are not robots or automatons. Even they have their off days. Though he has appeared on hundreds of recordings - from albums by jazz greats such as Horace Silver and Stanley Turrentine to rock stars Lou Reed and Aerosmith - he confesses that he has endured times when his muse and ability to play his horn seemed to have deserted him altogether.

"*Sometimes it feels great, but sometimes, like yesterday in the afternoon, for instance, I could barely play,*" discloses the 73-year-old, recalling a German jazz festival he performed at the day before this interview.

"*We were rehearsing and my chops felt terrible,*" he confides.

"*I had come from France and hadn't had any sleep so I got very nervous for the gig at night because I was so tired and in the dressing room I kept falling asleep.*"

It got to the point where Brecker felt so bad that he felt he couldn't perform.

"*Right before the concert, I kept saying, 'I can't do this,' but then, lo and behold, we went out there on stage and it sounded great. My chops came to life. I could play anything and the band, the Cologne funkateers with whom we had just briefly rehearsed, sounded great.*"

Perhaps it's not so much that music is a mystery, then, but that its creators, human beings, are a mystery. But there's nothing remotely mysterious about Randy Brecker's long and illustrious career, which has brought him numerous accolades and a Grammy award. He was a child prodigy who was born into a music-obsessed Philadelphia family. Raised on jazz, he rose to become one of the most accomplished trumpeters of his generation. As a young man, in the late '60s he played in the big bands of **Mel Lewis & Thad Jones**, **Clark Terry** and **Duke Pearson**

before enjoying stints in the **Horace Silver Quintet**

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and

Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers

. His career began just as hard bop was being eclipsed by jazz-rock but he made the transition to the new and exciting fusion genre via the groundbreaking group, Dreams, with whom he recorded two LPs. After that, plenty of session work kept him busy and then in the mid 70s, he led the

Brecker Brothers

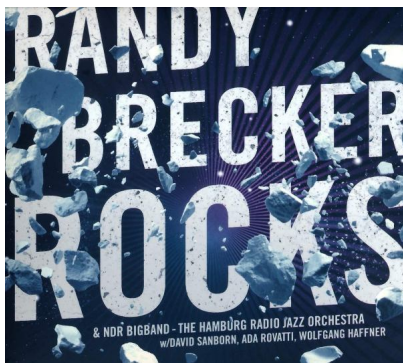
, alongside his saxophone-playing brother, Michael, and altoist, David Sanborn. The group's distinctive brand of brassy jazz-funk led to a US hit single ('Sneakin' Up Behind You') and six albums for Arista Records between 1975 and 1981. Although Brecker had released his debut solo album as far back as 1969 for the Solid State label - it was called 'Score' and produced by Blue Note stalwart, Duke Pearson - he didn't resume his solo career until almost twenty years later, in 1987.

Since then, Brecker has released solo albums at regular junctures - his 1997 LP, 'Into The Sun,' won him a Grammy - and now he is just about to unleash a new project recorded in tandem with Germany's NDR big band. It's called '**Rocks**' and features his saxophone-playing wife, **Ava Rovatti**

, as well as saxophone legend,

David Sanborn

. In an exclusive interview with SJF's Charles Waring, Randy Brecker shed light on his new venture and talked at length about his storied career...



Your new album, 'Rocks' is a collaboration with the NDR Big Band. What's the story behind it?

□ Two or three years ago, I did two tours with the band and they put me in touch with the

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arranger, Jorg Achim Keller, who I hadn't as yet met. Via email I sent him a wide variety of tunes and he picked ones he thought he could add something to. It was his idea, which actually sounded strange at the time, to add an extra woodwind section of double reeds like oboes, bassoons, and maybe a bass clarinet. He also wanted a core of three horns - trumpet, alto, and tenor saxophones - just like the original Brecker Brothers band horn section. It sounded very interesting, and he also wanted to augment what was already there on the original compositions. Jorg just added a lot of great stuff around the tunes that fit perfectly. I thought, well, it sounds good. I don't know this person yet but let's give it a shot. And sure enough, he came up with 11 arrangements. We did the rehearsal for three or four days and played these two or three gigs and it became so successful that the higher up said let's do another tour, so I think several months later, I went back to Germany and once again, we had another successful series of gigs. I remember we played in Hamburg at the club there and it several concerts. Then the higher up said, these two tours have been so successful, it would be a pity if it was recorded so let's record everything, which in the ensuing weeks, we did. Joachim Becker who is with Jazzline Records, heard it and said I want to release it and here we are today. He got us a gig last night at the WDR Jazz Festival. We played with a wonderful German rhythm section who lightly call themselves the Cologne Funkateers. We did some of those tunes are some of my wife's new tunes and it was a very successful gig last night, so that kind of brings you up to date.

As a soloist, how can you convey what it feels like to play with such a large ensemble?

Well, it's a different kind of feeling but with this band, it was interesting. It depends on the group. These guys knew how to listen to the solos and complimented what we did one hundred percent. And the tunes also complimented what we were to play. The music is written so well it was easy to fit in. Sometimes with big bands, they become overpowering and you don't have much room to stretch out, so you tend to play more safely or you just don't have really room for expression. It's different from playing in a small group. But I'm happy to say that in this case, I didn't feel that. It was just like playing in a small group with an added dimension, other than being overrun by the whole thing.

'Rocks' draws on your back catalogue for inspiration. What the reasons behind some of your choices for songs - were they personal favourites or things that you thought might do well in that setting?

They were tunes that I thought he could do something with and he chose the tunes that he really thought appealed to him and thought he could add something to.

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Your wife, Ava Rovatti (pictured above), is a saxophonist and features on the album. What qualities does she bring to your music and some of those older tunes, which obviously she didn't play on originally.

My brother, Michael, was a big fan and he saw her develop for years. We've been together, married, for 16 years and have been together off and on before that for five years. He knew her for a long time I was a big fan of hers and she was a big fan of his. But what I liked about her playing and her personality and the whole thing, so to speak, is the fact that she's a very strong woman, and she has a style all of her own. You can't even pin it down. Mike hasn't been an influence but she doesn't sound or try to sound like anyone else. Both as a writer and as a player, she just set her own place and is constantly developing. Her writing has improved dramatically over the years, hence we recorded some of her tunes recently, and they're all great. So I'm very proud of her. She works very hard at expanding her vocabulary and her musicianship all the time, she plays every day.

Given that your wife Ava is a musician, do you guys talk shop all the time?

It's interesting, you know, we don't talk about music that much. When we're together, we play duets a lot. After we had our daughter, Stella, that fell by the wayside because Ava is also a great homemaker, if that's the right word, and chef and mother. She's many things. She does painting, she is a very fine artist and photographer and works incredible things with craft. In fact, she took all the pictures. She has a photo studio set up, she took all the photos. She does an amazing amount of things. She's a real renaissance woman in that way. So the music is kind of the icing on the cake, if you can believe it. We do talk about it, though, it enters the conversation.

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Your old sparring partner from your Brecker Brothers days, David Sanborn (above), features on three tunes.

That was a great idea of Jorg Akim Keller. He said, I have this idea of using three horns, why don't you call Sanborn and we can get him over here to do it. With some hemming and hawing, which is typical David - he'll never just say yes, it will take him weeks for him to finally commit to it - he finally said yes and did a great job. He played on some of the original tunes, particularly 'Rocks,' which is on the 1975 'Brecker Brothers' record. He trades fours with my brother. I think it was a lot of fun for him to revisit the tunes.

What's it like playing music with someone like David, who you know so well and have shared the stage with many times before?

E.S.P. is a good word for it. It was the same with brother Mike and it's like that now with Ava, where we do things by E.S.P. We didn't have to talk about phrasing, we just had the same conception with regard to the nuances, the vibrato and underplay, crescendos, or how to bend notes. We just did it. And there weren't many other musicians that we played with that were in that same little orbit. I could think of two others, which were Ronnie Cuber on baritone, and the great trombonist who sadly passed away many years ago, Barry Rogers. So as a five-piece horn section we were really good together. We could jam up a chart in a second if they didn't have one and it would sound great.

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Do you think you'll take it on the road again now that you've got an album coming out?

Yeah, we're going to do some gigs in May. They're all pretty busy working for the NDR station and so they have a lot of different projects but the hope is maybe we can do even more gigs, doing some gigs in Germany in may and getting together for a week.

Do you think there may be an opportunity for you to come to the UK at some point?

I certainly hope so. Joachim was just over here and we were talking about the future and how we can keep this out on the road so he is going to make some calls, as will I.



Going right back to the beginning, when did your love affair with the trumpet begin, if you can call it that.

Well, yeah, in the long run it is but sometimes you want to throw it out the window (laughs). I keep at it, keep trying to learn that darn instrument. But my father, Bobby Brecker, was a fan. He was a piano player and a singer and songwriter also. He was a lawyer as a profession but a musician first and he loved trumpet players. We were from Philadelphia where, during the early fifties, Clifford Brown (pictured above) was playing there quite a bit with Max Roach, that was their home base. Richie Powell, Bud Powell's brother, lived in Philly. Clifford was from Wilmington, which is only 40 minutes away. They played frequently and dad always went to hear them and had all Clifford's records. I remember when I was maybe four or five years old, he was playing Clifford's, 'Ghost Of A Chance,' and he was emotionally overcome and grabbed

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me and said 'Randy, trumpet is the greatest jazz instrument.' I took that to heart and when I was a little older, eight years old, I had a choice of playing a trumpet or clarinet at the local grade school in suburban Philadelphia. So, I grabbed the trumpet... I'm 74 now and still trying to figure it out all these years later, but I've been playing for that many years.

Did your dad play or record with any professional musicians?

He played with professional musicians in Philly but he didn't record but for my record called 'Into The Sun,' which was recorded in 1997, I recorded him. He was a brilliant songwriter, he really was. On the album I wrote a four-part suite called 'The Hottest Man In Town' where he is playing the piano and singing a song that he wrote for me ('Prophesy') when I was two weeks old, and it completely forecasts the fact that I'll be a horn-playing musician. So, my future was set in stone.

Was jazz something that you immediately gravitated to because of your dad?

Yeah, I can say definitely so, as did my brother, who was three years younger than I and started a little later to get serious about it. Music was a part of our household. My sister is a fine classical pianist and harpist but she never quite took to jazz, and for whatever creative reasons, she took to classical music and got a masters degree in music composition at the University of Pennsylvania. In the composition category, Mike and I are pretty much self-taught although he did take some lessons from a wonderful guy named Edward Grainer so he had other avenues that he could provoke, I guess, to get the music. I'm completely self-taught. I just learned by sitting at the piano and figuring out voicings and just writing and recording everything on a daily basis.

You mentioned Clifford Brown earlier but who else were you listening to when you were growing up?

Three or four of the records Dad had were Clifford's records. I remember this was 1955. I was 10 years old and he had gotten his first stereo. This was not that long after 12-inch LPs came out. He had a lot of 78s and 10-inch LPs but one of the first records he bought was 'Round About Midnight,' Miles Davis's first Columbia record with Red Garland, "Trane", Paul Chambers and Philly Joe (Jones). So I listened to that over and over and learned Monk's 'Round Midnight,'

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although Miles played it differently. It didn't take me long to realise after dad had given me a small record player on my tenth birthday that I had the idea to play along with the records. Another one was Shorty Rogers' 'Martians Come Back,' which was a very nice record and featured (clarinettist) Jimmy Giuffre. My brother, Mike, who started on clarinet, also listened to that one a lot. Another one was the Chet Baker-Gerry Mulligan record, 'My Funny Valentine,' in particular. So I learned that tune. I started with the guys were more lyrical, who mainly didn't have that technique that Clifford Brown did or Dizzy (Gillespie). because those guys scared me. I didn't learn their tunes because I didn't have a technique. So I basically started with ballads: 'Round Midnight,' 'My Funny Valentine,' and some stuff on the Shorty Rogers' record that was kind of easy to hear and copy. And slowly but surely, I made my way into playing faster tempos and gained more technique as a trumpet player as time went on. But those three or four records probably were the first ones. I listened to also the Art Blakey record, 'Live At Birdland' with Clifford Brown, but I couldn't quite get to that level yet.

But you aspired to be like him, did you?

Oh yeah. I loved his playing and later from Philadelphia, where I'm from, Lee Morgan popped onto the scene and I loved his playing too. We had the same trumpet teacher and of course, he came out of Clifford Brown, he was a big fan. Later on in his life, I got to know Lee pretty well. And there are a lot of good trumpet players from Philly - a guy named Burt Collins, a lot of good saxophonists, that I could hear like Jimmy Heath. "Trane" was on the scene though I never heard him live, but he was a big influence. Dizzy lived in Philly when he moved from North Carolina for three or four years so he had Philadelphia in his consciousness. It was a great place to grow up. So many great musicians there.

It must have been like jazz heaven living there in Philly at that time.

It was, there was just so much music and dad would take me along quite a bit when I was a youngster, six or seven or eight, to hear great music. I heard Maynard Ferguson's big band and Miles, Carmen McRae, and Monk. So it was just a charmed upbringing.

Did you actually get to hear Clifford Brown before he died?

No, unfortunately I didn't but I remember the day he was killed. I was barely 10 years old so I

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hadn't been to any of the clubs yet but dad was just visibly upset. We were sitting at the breakfast table and he read that Clifford had been killed the night before and was beside himself. I remember that day really well.

You eventually left Philadelphia for New York.

You can only go so far, I suppose, in Philly and I had met some New York musicians at various collegiate jazz competitions. I had met (trumpeter) Clark Terry. Our band at Indiana University won the Notre Dame Jazz Festival, which was the big jazz festival to go to and try to compete with other college bands. Clark Terry was a judge that year and I won a trumpet prize, and I remember Dave Sanborn was also there that year. I had met him at Indiana University and we stayed in touch. And there were some other judges there that enjoyed my playing. There was another festival in Vienna. As a result of the Notre Dame Jazz Festival, we - the Indiana University jazz ensemble and sextet - were offered a tour for the US State Department, so we went off to the Middle East and Asia for 16 weeks in February of 1966. We toured all the Arab countries plus India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. We were out there four months - imagine that - on the road and we became a good band. Some of us who were the improvisers ended up at an international jazz competition that was being held in Vienna that year, in the summer of 66, in June, right after the tour was over. And the judges on that were Mel Lewis, Ron Carter, Joe Zawinul, Cannonball Adderley, J.J. Johnson and Art Farmer. We were there for a couple of weeks while they weeded out people and there were semi-finals, finals, and there was a concert. After that, I transferred to New York University in September 1966 and that's when (drummer/bandleader) Mel Lewis asked me to join his band with Thad Jones. Clark Terry also asked me to join his big band. How amazing was that?

And then you joined the Duke Pearson's band after that, didn't you?

Yeah, and that was also a thrill. I probably played more with Duke's band who seem to play a little more than the other bands and mostly at the Half Note, which was a great club in Lower Manhattan. We played weekends. But Duke also took that band on the road and played up and down the East coast. Sadly, he got ill with a debilitating disease called multiple sclerosis, so he was taken from us at around the age 40. There was also a great band with Bob Cranshaw and Mickey Roker in the rhythm section and a great trumpet section with Marvin Stamm and Burt Collins, who was also from Philly. Also in the band were people like Frank Foster, Joe Henderson, Jerry Dodgion, Lew Tabackin, who was also from Philly. It was a big thrill.

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What was Duke (pictured above) like as a person and musician?

He was always in my corner, I'll say that. He was the producer on my first record, called 'Score,' which was done in '68, early on in my career and he was also, generally, a great producer. He worked for Blue Note/Solid State. They were really the same company, and Duke had the same office as a producer. He could overview whatever the project was. He always had great suggestions and was almost like a second father to me. He was softly spoken, a very sweet guy who had an eye for the ladies. I won't say any more but there's nothing wrong with that (laughs). He wrote one of my favourite songs, it's called 'Amanda' and my first daughter who I had with my first wife, Eliane Elias, was named in honour of that, though we used the Brazilian pronunciation.

You mentioned your first album, 'Score,' and drummer Mickey Roker was on that album.

He was. That was an outgrowth of Duke Pearson's big band. (Bassist) Bob Cranshaw, as well, I think, was on some of it along with other people I'd met along the way, like (bassist) Eddie Gomez and (guitarist) Larry Coryell, who I had met on summer in Seattle where he was from. He moved to New York about a year before I did and we played together constantly off and on throughout our lives. Until he passed away.



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What do you remember about that first session for the 'Score' album recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's famous studio in New Jersey?

I was very nervous because it was my first record and I didn't know the whole process and it was Rudy Van Gelder's where you couldn't touch anything or he'd be mad. I was with all these famous guys, other friends of mine from Duke Pearson's band, particularly Burt Collins, a great trumpet player, and his wife. Another great trumpeter, Joe Shepley, also turned up to listen to the date 'cos they were fans and also they were guys that I looked up to. So between me being nervous and wondering how it was going to come out, I think all in all it got generally very good reviews and it has held up pretty well throughout the years. The idea was to do some of my earliest compositions, and those are with Larry Coryell and Eddie Gomez. They were melodic and had a kind of folkiness quality, and I played flugelhorn. We also did some of Hal Galper's compositions, who I had met him early on in New York. He had a quintet with us and we did many records with him but this was the first collaboration.



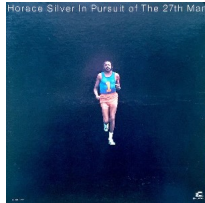
It's a great little album and after that, you went on to work with the great Horace Silver.

I joined Horace Silver after being with (jazz-rock band) Blood, Sweat and Tears for a year in which I didn't really get a chance to play very much. I learned a lot about the business and how to make records from playing on their first record, which was called 'Child Is Father To The Man,' but when Horace called, it was just too much of a great opportunity to play with one of my idols in the real jazz quintet where I play on every tune. The first band was with Benny Maupin, John B Williams and a young Billy Cobham on drums. And then Horace broke up the band after about a year and a half without giving as much notice. Billy and I came back to New York with no gig basically. We had two weeks' notice and by that time Michael had been playing saxophone seriously.... I had first heard him in Chicago with the band from Indiana University. He was in New York and had met a pair of singer-songwriters who had met a great trombone player named Barry Rogers, looking for a trumpet player and a drummer to form a new band called Dreams. It was just happenstance. Billy and I had come back to New York with no gig so

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that band was born. We did that for two or three years and Billy left to join Mahavishnu Orchestra and became a superstar with their first record. Then he hired Mike and I back to join Horace in 1973. Horace hired us and Will Lee on bass, who was the last bass player in Dreams, and we joined Horace again for about a little less than a year.



Was that when you made 'In Pursuit Of The 27th Man' album for Blue Note with Horace?

Yeah, it was. It was a classic and one of his better records.

Did you feel when you joined Dreams that hard bop was past its sell by date and that you were looking for a new avenue of musical expression?

Yeah, that's exactly it. The golden age of jazz had, I suppose, passed and though it came back to an extent, it was the advent, for lack of a better word, of fusion. At the time it didn't have a negative connotation. Fusion was in the air. Miles was changing up using electric instruments and Larry Coryell, who was a good friend of mine, was in a band called The Eleventh House. I played on their first record and went out on the road with them for awhile. Alphonse Mouzon was there on drums with (keyboardist) Mike Mandel and a guy named Danny Trifan on bass. All of us were trying to break some of the rules and not just record like a jazz quintet with trumpet and tenor sax because that had been done so well by so many groups.

Your career began at the tail-end of the hard bop era.

Yeah, I was in the right place at the right time. I had all those great Blue Note records featuring all my idols and there I was recording for essentially Blue Note even though they called it Solid

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State. Blue Note was an African-American brand so they didn't want too many white guys on that side of the aisle, but it was all the same, the exact same office where Duke (Pearson) worked out of. And Thad Jones and Mel Lewis were on Solid State and Chick Corea.



□

Talking of Blue Note, □ you joined Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, also in the late 70s.□

I did. It was another short-ish period. I was with him for eight or nine months. If I'm not wrong, while Dreams was getting its shit together, so to speak, Art (pictured above) needed a trumpet player and I had just come back to New York from Horace and he wasn't working that much. So I was rehearsing with Dreams and then would play with Art Blakey at night. And it wasn't a great period for him. He didn't have a recording contract. We played a lot at a place called Slugs, which was a club which Lee Morgan was actually shot to death by his wife, tragically, a few years later. But I played a few nights there with the great Art Blakey. We played all the classic tunes and travelled a bit. We travelled to Boston to play and played in Washington DC and also Philadelphia. But I was with him off and on for about eight months.

Can you remember your first gig with him and how you felt?

Oh, yeah, I remember it really well because there was no rehearsal and it was opening night at Slugs. Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw, who had helped me get the gig, were in the front row. And I had to play all these tunes. I knew all the music, luckily, because Art had no rehearsal - he had no parts, and no written music, but there was a wonderful saxophonist, a Panamanian named Carlos Garnett. So we did some of his tunes and just all the classic Art Blakey tunes - 'Night In Tunisia,' 'Moanin',' and all the great Benny Golson tunes, those you associate with Art Blakey. Luckily, I knew a lot of his material. But I was thrilled and terrified at the same time.

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What's it like to play with the drummer who is so powerful and dominant when you're soloing?

I was at a conference about a month ago called Jazz Congress held by the *Jazz Times* magazine at Lincoln Centre. There was an Art Blakey symposium where they assembled up to 27 ex-Messengers and each of us talked once and was given a question to answer. It was a school unto itself and you're right, he was really a bombastic drummer. I remember mentioning this at the symposium and said it playing with him felt like you were being run over by a steam roller. But he really set the pace on the drums. There was no question when your solo started and when it ended. He would lead you through your solo via the drums. That was my question, "what was he like as a bandleader?" And I was like, he led from the drums. He didn't talk much about what we were going to play, he would just start playing the tune and you would know what it was by the style. You joined in and he would lead us from beginning to end. That's how he led the band.

What did you learn from working with someone like him that you could use in your own career?

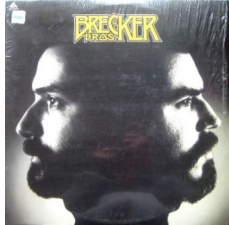
Just the seriousness with which he approached jazz and music in general. He was like an African chief. He didn't talk about the music but if he heard something he didn't like, he might pull your coattails. Horace Silver, on the other hand, was a little more specific. Art gave you plenty of room to stretch out. He would never tell you how to play but he would lead you through the solos by the drums. Horace was more verbal about things he didn't want you to play. He didn't want you to play outside or complicated music on the funky tunes. He would say, on 'Song For My Father,' or tunes like that, "I want you to imagine you are in a disco and the girls are sitting on their seats and I want to see their butts shaking." He'd give us a little lecture every night and occasionally, if we played too long or played too many notes or he thought we didn't play funky enough on the tunes, he would mention it. He said, "you can play as out as you want, you can play whatever you want on the tunes that aren't funky but on certain tunes, they have a function in the set, so I want you to play like that." And he was very strict in that sense. Art would never say something like that. He'd just let you play but at the same time he led you through your solo.

And then when you heard that big crescendoing press roll, I suppose, you knew your solo was over.

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(Laughs) Yeah, you knew when it was over. If you played too long, he'd let you know it too.



You started off playing hard bop and then you got into a funkier kind of jazz and formed the Brecker Brothers. How did that project come into being?

It was a goal of mind to write music. When Sanborn and Mike moved to town at the same time, I thought they would be a great nucleus for a horn section. And I gathered other band members, some of which had played in Dreams on the second record: old friends like Don Grolnick who I also went to music camp with and bass player, Will Lee, who I had actually got to come to New York and played on Dreams' second record. Along with an old friend, Steve Khan, who was a songwriter/composer Sammy Cahn's son. Steve was a composer in his own right and they all lived in the same building, many of them, with a drummer named Chris Parker. So that was the nucleus of the band and I just decided to write music for those guys. I was doing a lot of session work at that time, too, but when I got home I didn't practice the trumpet since I had been playing all day and would write arrangements and just compose. At one point I had nine tunes finished, and was just getting ready to hire a studio to record everything. I was going to do a demo and then would make copies on cassette and send around the record companies, trying to get a deal for what in my head was going to be a Randy Brecker solo record. That's what I was looking for. In my quest, I got a phone call from a guy named Steve Backer, who had signed a production deal with a new label which was called Arista. It was formerly Bell Records and the president of the company was Clive Davis, who was well-known in the business as a genius and he was the guy who signed Mike and I to Columbia records with Dreams. Somehow, he had heard about this music, I guess via the grapevine, and wanted to sign us. Because of that I didn't have to go and do a demo and search for a record label. I told him I'd be happy to do it but there was one catch to it: Clive wanted me to call it the Brecker Brothers.

What was your response?

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I said no, look, I wrote all this music. Mike had nothing to do with all the music, nor Sanborn. They were just practising and hadn't really formulated or conceptualised what they wanted to do as band leaders but I had. I told him that I'd spent a lot of time writing all this stuff and arranging it so I thought of it as doing a solo record. But Clive stuck to his guns. He said, if I sign you, you sign as the Brecker Brothers. It was a nice opportunity because he was number one in the business. It was also a new company and you knew he was going to promote you. I said okay, call it the Brecker Brothers and thought maybe Sanborn, who was in the front line with Mike and me, could be the long lost cousin or something. With that settled, we went in and did the nine tunes. But the story didn't even end there.

What happened?

Clive Davis called me up to his room, because I was essentially the bandleader, Mike wasn't really involved even. He said look, I love everything you've recorded, but you need a single. So I duly protested and said I don't want to do a single. Clive, in his own way, said if you don't do a single, I'm not releasing it. So I trudged back to our rehearsal studio and I told the guys, look, we've got to do a single. I don't have a tune so let's try to jam something up and lo and behold, the force was with us because within about four hours we had jammed up a whole tune with Will Lee singing. On this one we all co-wrote. Everybody had an idea. We did a rough recording of the tune and we played it for Clive and he loved it and he had us go to the studio the next day. He came to oversee everything and it became a tune called 'Sneaking Up Behind You.' And he stuck that on the record. I didn't particularly want it there but it became a hit. And that's what sold the whole thing. It shot up to number two on the urban/R&B charts in Billboard. And as a result, that record sold close to 200,000 copies but not on the strength of my ingenious writing but on the fact that we had done that single that did so well. And eventually people caught onto the other stuff and it was all due to 'Sneaking Up Behind You' that the Brecker Brothers became as well known as we did and then, of course, we did other records. We did our own writing and always tried to have the second hit, which we were not that successful at, although 'East River' did quite well.

What are your memories of that time? It must have been an exciting period.

Yeah, that's the word I would use. It was very exciting because never in a million years would I ever imagine that we'd be on the Billboard charts, even the pop charts, after 'Sneaking Up Behind You' came out. People started buying the album and the album moved up into the Top 200 pop charts, and got up into the thirties, which for a record like that was quite extraordinary.

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We were very excited. We'd buy Billboard magazine every week. We were all close friends and we'd go out to eat a lot and we'd scour Billboard and see what we were doing and if the record was still selling. For several weeks it really was quite exciting. The next thing, you go from being relatively unknown to pretty famous, overnight it felt like.

How did some your jazz musician buddies feel when you became almost like a pop star?

Well, there might have been some jealousy in certain guys who didn't like that style of music but most of them were really behind us and it came to a point when everybody was trying to fusion.

I think eventually there were a lot of mediocre records made by musicians and would-be producers and record company owners who said well, I'd better jump on this too, and started jumping on the bandwagon. Then the quality went down. But the good bands, Weather Report, John McLaughlin Mahavishnu Orchestra and Chick Corea's Return To Forever always presented great music.

Talking of Weather Report, on the new album, 'Rocks,' you do a new version of the song 'Pastoral,' which was your tribute to Jaco Pastorius from your 'Hanging In The City' solo album.

It was nice to redo that tune. They did such a nice job with the arrangement to bring out the nuances of the tune. And that wasn't a well-known or noticed tune. I was very close to Jaco and played with him for a couple of years. It was so sad when he was gone so it was nice to dedicate that tune to him. It's very nice that it's on the big band record and people can really hear it, many of whom will hear it for the first time.



What are memories of playing in Jaco's Word Of Mouth big band?

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I took my brother's place. The original Word Of Mouth sextet was Bob Mintzer and Michael Brecker. And in 1992, Mike finally thought it was time to clean up his act and he went into rehab for a couple of months and after coming out he never touched a drink or drug the rest of his life. But, in essence, I took his place in Jaco's band. Jaco asked me to join his band after Mike left and I was with him off and on until he died. We did an extensive tour of the US just as the sextet but in larger cities, we'd meet up with local guys that would form the big band. It was a different big band in every city. One big band in New York, another big band in Chicago. There was a good big band in LA. We worked from coast-to-coast as a sextet but probably, and the only real time I've done that in the US, we were on the road for about six weeks, hitting every spot because Jaco was that popular.

What was he like to work with?

Well, it started out fun. He was a kind of crazy guy who had maybe a little too much success too soon but he had a problem with substance abuse. There's no other way to put it. Both of his parents were alcoholics. It kind of ran in the family and he drank too much and he did too many things up his nose. Eventually, his mental illness, which I suppose was under the surface and lay dormant, became active and came to the fore and he was never the same after that. He could play by autopilot but he was a different person. He just wasn't there and it was a tragic to see. We were all crestfallen and we still had gigs where we had to play with him when he would do very odd things. He ended up in New York for a period of time just homeless. We tried to take care of him. Mike and I had a club and every night he'd show up at the club 'cos he was living in the street. It was just terrible. But when he was clean, he was a genius in his own way. He wrote amazingly great tunes and had a wonderful orchestrator called Larry Warrilow. He'd like to take credit for the orchestrations but his copyist, as he put it, who passed away several years ago and was also pretty heavily into alcoholism' wrote all those great arrangements and orchestrations. It was just a thrill to be with Jaco.

Looking back at your long and eventful career, Randy, what are the major highlights for you?

Playing with the Brecker Brothers and leading that band and seeing everyone's growth, like Mike, who eventually started writing and had such a great career as a solo artist. The Brecker Brothers I think is the core of my career. But also playing with Jaco was a thrill. Less well-known but still a highlight are Hal Galper's records, which had fusion tendencies but Hal also wrote great tunes which were also a lot of fun to play on. Hal always had a great band. I always cite

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that as some really good work. Also, playing with Larry Coryell. We did a record together as 11th House with Alphonse Mouzon just months before they both passed, and we had big plans to tour together as 70-year-olds. It was called Seven Secrets and it's out on the Savoy Jazz label. There's some great writing and playing from there. Everybody was at the top of his game. Alphonse passed away first on Christmas that year and then three months later, Larry passed away.

Are you a guy who listens a lot to his own records his the solos you do and think that's a good one that's not?

Yeah, but I don't do it that much because most of the time, things don't sound that great, to me, unless I'm in a certain mood where everything sounds great (laughs). It did happen a few weeks ago where it was very late at night and I listened to some of my old records on my laptop and said, you know, most this stuff sounds pretty good. It's funny, one of the last times I saw my late brother, I was at his house and he was really pretty sick and he looked at me and said wistfully, "you know, I think we were pretty good together." Like it was just occurring to him.



What's your favourite musical memory of being with Michael?

Oh, man, that's a tough one. I suppose a good one would be the record we did with WDR Big Band in 2003 called 'Some Skunk Funk.' It was the last time we played together. We didn't see each other that much because he was busy with his solo career and playing together in Brecker Brothers was not full time at that point. That was a live concert and very exciting to do. Vincent Mendoza wrote great charts and it was great standing next to Mike again. Shortly after, he started getting back pain and it was the first hint that he had some kind of illness which was misdiagnosed for several weeks and turned out to be a thing called MDS - Myelodysplastic Syndrome - and it sadly took his life two and a half years later.

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Finally, Randy, what's on the musical horizon after 'Rocks.' Is there anything else in the pipeline?

I'm having a busy time. I'm releasing 'Brecker Plays Rovatti.' That will be out at the end of the summer, where we do ten of my wife Ada's tunes. It's a pretty good band so I hope to tour some with that. I'm also going to co-lead record with the great alto player, Eric Marienthal, so I'm kind of doing that bit by bit. I'd also like to mention the band I had with (tenor saxophonist) Bob Berg. It featured David Kikoski on piano, a great German bass player named Dieter Ilg, and Joey Baron on drums. We toured quite a bit until Bob was sadly killed in a car accident (in 2002). We had big plans, too, but recently an album we did in 1988 was rereleased along with actually a video of us ('Randy Brecker Quintet Live 1988') playing at Sweet Basil, and that was also a high point. That was a great band. We did some of my tunes, and some of Bob's tunes. It's one of the best quintets I've ever led. So that was also a high point of my career. That was out just recently.

It's rumoured that you're going to be doing something with Billy Cobham in London later this year. □

Yes, I'm going to regroup with my old friend. We haven't played together for years and it's going to be his 75th birthday tour where we are going to do the music of his album 'Crosswinds.' We're going to play Ronnie Scott's for a week although I think we'll be playing other music besides 'Crosswinds.' So there's a lot for the future. I'm not sure what we're going to record next but something will happen, I'll start writing again. □

'ROCKS' IS OUT ON FEBRUARY 22ND VIA JAZZLINE/DELTA MUSIC MEDIA