

# The happenstance of Randy Brecker

The elder Brecker has featured often in these pages (starting around 1967) but KEVIN RYAN fills in background to the trumpeter's personal and musical journeys not often seen

On Keith Jarrett at summer school: 'He didn't really talk to anybody else. None of us realised he was there until we looked at the picture, because he kept to his own. Funny how those things develop'



Antonio Cisterna

Randy Brecker remembers the day his family got a hi-fi turntable, remembers the air's radio embrace. His father bought it as a gift to himself for his 40th birthday. Brecker was 10 at the time, 1955. As soon as his father went to work, he would lug the record player to his room and play trumpet along with jazz albums, a musical companion. He started with ballads. Miles Davis's *'Round About Midnight*, Chet Baker's *My Funny Valentine*, Shorty Rogers' *Martians Come Back!* That's how he learned to play trumpet, with Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk and Clifford Brown all crowding in around him.

Brecker grew up in suburban Philadelphia, always surrounded by music. His father was a semi-professional pianist, who, every day, as soon as he got home from his work, put on a record – Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Clifford Brown. "He was a good piano player, songwriter and singer", Brecker says. "Really, music came first. He was a lawyer and legal representative by profession, but he was really a musician first".

On weekends, musicians would crowd the house for jam sessions. "Just by happenstance it turned out our next door neighbour was a really good tenor player and his sister was a good singer. We moved into the perfect place, to our luck, so that was the nucleus". Philadelphia was an exciting town for a musicians – people like trumpeter Red Rodney, the Heath Brothers, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie. And young Randy

Brecker, right there in the middle of all of it. One evening, he and his dad nodded along to a Clifford Brown record. He was five at the time, so bits of his memory feel cloudy but his father leaned in, "Randy, trumpet is the greatest jazz instrument".

When he was eight, Brecker took a music class and each class a different student brought their favourite record. Most kids brought Elvis. A young Brecker brought *Cloudburst* by Dave Lambert, Jon Hendricks and Annie Ross. Around that time, he joined the school band and faced a big decision: The music department had trumpets and clarinets. He chose trumpet. When he was 12, he started to play at his dad's jam sessions.

Since then, Brecker's travelled the world playing music, leading nearly 30 albums. In 2003 and 2008 he won Grammys for Best Contemporary Jazz Album, in 2006 and 2013 for Best Large Jazz Ensemble Album. He's played with Frank Sinatra, Carla Bley, Toninho Horta, Bill Evans, Yoko Ono, Robert Palmer, Frank Zappa. The punching brass sweep on Chaka Khan's *I Know You, I Love You* is his. He was on Steely Dan's *Gauche*, which wouldn't be the same without that horn blast on *Babylon Sisters*.

As happenstance would have it, Jon Hendricks was at one jam session. In disbelief, his hero right there, Brecker rushed to his room then scurried back with trumpet. He lashed along with the band. Brecker's dad, having bought a tape recorder days earlier, recorded the whole thing. "It was the first time I heard myself playing back. I played a couple of phrases and everybody laughed and encouraged it". Fifty-odd years later, he met Hendricks, backstage at the Blue Note. Hendricks turned to him and asked "Do you still have that tape?" Turns out it was lost to the vicissitudes of time.

As Brecker got older, the jam sessions filled the house non-stop, with his sister on piano and sometimes bass and his brother Mike on clarinet. "Mike and I practised together. We would just improvise in the bathroom because we liked the echo. We were just playing anything. We'd just play free". Three years younger than Randy, Mike would eventually migrate to saxophone, on



Peter Symes

which he became one of the most influential players of his generation. At the mention of clarinet, Brecker stirs with a memory of Mike and Buddy DeFranco. He recalls a show that he and Mike played with DeFranco at the Buddy DeFranco Jazz Festival, about four years before Mike passed away. They were stomping out bebop, and Buddy was wild, swinging and catapulting and wailing and wild. Mike leaned into Randy, whispered in his ear: "You know I hate the clarinet still". Randy, with a laugh: "He never really took to the instrument".

Listening once to Clifford Brown's *Ghost Of A Chance*, Randy was struck by a stuttering note. In that moment, he felt the essence of jazz. Improvisation. It felt calm and warm, natural and desolate at the same time. He loved it. By 15, he found himself at band camps with fellow 15-year-olds David Sanborn and Don Grolnick. He mentions that Keith Jarrett was there, too. "He didn't really talk to anybody else. None of us realised he was there until we looked at the picture, because he kept to his own. Funny how those things develop".

Brecker was part of the 1965 Indiana University Jazz Ensemble that won the Notre Dame Collegiate Jazz Festival. Their prize was a State Department sponsored four-month tour of Asia and the Middle East. "It was a really swinging band. It was really like a pro band. You could never tell it was college kids. Hell of a life-altering event". They saw India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon. Brecker had just turned 20. He was entranced by Damascus, and thousands of years of history still unbothered. Tehran was practically a Western city at the time. He loved the ruins, the way the Egyptian pyramids looked in the heat of the air. Persepolis and the palace of Alexander the Great – what was left of it, anyway. Aleppo, Baghdad, Beirut. Palatial cities ribboned by sand – he thinks about the beautiful spires and arches and minarets he saw, the varying worlds, now mostly rubble. "It's just heartbreaking to see what's happened".

The tour ended in Beirut. "But there was an international jazz competition in Vienna that, by happenstance, was going on a couple weeks after the tour was over". Some of the boys went; others, exhausted, returned home. Brecker's parents were waiting for him in Austria. "The judges of the festival were Art Farmer, Cannonball Adderley, J.J. Johnson, Ron Carter and Mel Lewis". His rivals included clarinetist Eddie Daniels, Brazilian trumpeter Claudio Roditi, Czech bassist Miroslav Vitous, bassist and alto saxophonist George Mraz. They all got to know each other, and have all since cultivated styles, careers, associations. "I was in the right place at the right time, I guess, in a lot of things leading up to moving to New York".



Randy Brecker with the Duke Pearson band at the Half-Note Café, NY 1967

"One summer I was in Seattle and I was going to school. There was a lot happening in Seattle". He met guitarist Larry Coryell and trumpeter Woody Shaw, and began playing at the Penthouse, a jazz club where all the local guys warmed up before the headliners took stage. Brecker caught the ear of Horace Silver. "He heard me play and we kind of palled around for a week. The next week Art Blakey was there with one of my idols, Lee Morgan".

When Brecker moved to New York, Woody Shaw and Horace Silver helped him establish a career. Marvin Stamm, who as a 20-year-old had taught 15-year-old Brecker at Stan Kenton band camps, connected him to the vibrant New York City studio scene in late 1960s. Before long, he was working every day. In 1967, he joined Blood, Sweat & Tears and played on their debut, *Child Is Father To The Man*. Fans of the album always mention his romping duel with Fred Lipsius on the cover of Harry Nilsson's *Without Her*. A year later, he released his first solo album, *Score*. On tenor saxophone was the unknown 19-year-old Mike

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Brecker. With Mahavishnu drummer Billy Cobham and guitarist John Abercrombie Mike and Randy formed Dreams. Then, a few years later, they formed The Brecker Brothers band, with its very distinctive and virtuosic angle on the fusion of jazz and rock, well characterised by the album title *Heavy Metal Bebop*.

The brothers were big in the studio in the heyday of rock and soul, playing with Stevie Wonder, James Brown, Aerosmith, Elton John, Luther Vandross, Blue Öyster Cult, Chaka Khan, James Taylor. They were on Parliament's Mothership Connection, Grover Washington Jr.'s Mister Magic, Lou Reed's Berlin, Chaka Khan's Chaka, Bruce Springsteen's Born To Run – just think about *Tenth Avenue Freeze Out* or the sweeping horns on Todd Rundgren's *I Saw The Light*. And that's only the 1970s.

They worked with Paul Simon, whom Brecker describes as very meticulous, but creative and eager. And Rick James, whom they met while recording the first Spyro Gyra album. Soon enough, Randy and Mike Brecker earned the admiration of the Prime Minister of Funk himself, Mr. George Clinton. Brecker recalls that time with the P-Funk collective as fun. You never knew who would march into the studio wearing space-suit regalia.

The Brecker Brothers band saw a 10-year hiatus when Randy and Mike focused on their solo careers, reuniting in 1992 to record *The Return Of The Brecker Brothers*, which earned three Grammy nominations. Two years later, with the follow-up, *Out Of The Loop*, they clinched their first Grammy. And 1997 saw Brecker win his first Grammy as a solo artist.

Then, in 2004, at the Leverkusener Jazz Fest, Randy played with his brother Mike for the last time. Shortly thereafter, Mike was onstage at the Mount Fuji Jazz Festival when he felt a sharp pain in his back. Within a few months, doctors had diagnosed him with myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS), a rare form of leukemia. He played his last show at Carnegie Hall.

In 2013, Randy released *The Brecker Brothers Band Reunion*, a homage to Mike, a way of bringing him to the present – to the jam session. He continues this session with his latest round of performances. "All the guys have played in the Brecker Brothers Band for years". That amounts to roughly four decades' worth of possibilities – years of knowing good people, of knowing virtuosos. Brecker says it as if he has stumbled from his childhood bedroom to the international stage by chance. As if music comes from somewhere unknown and escapes before you can truly catch it. Like Aleppo, which used to be a manmade Eden, but is now a pitstop of ruins. Or maybe he sees it the other way. Beauty outlasting architecture. A record that skips a few times, then spins right back to life.