

Reprints from the

International Trumpet Guild Journal

to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet

Tom Erdmann – Rick Braun: Life in the Fast Lane (Oct 01 / 44)

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Rick Braun: Life in the Fast Lane

BY TOM ERDMANN

Trumpeter, producer, composer, and arranger Rick Braun is an excellent example of a musician who has quietly worked hard for many years and suddenly is recognized as an “overnight success.” His album with saxophonist Boney James, *Shake It Up*, was number one on the *Billboard* magazine Contemporary Jazz Album chart for 11 weeks and has moved around in the top five positions for over a year. The first single from that album, *Grazin’ In The Grass*, hit number one and stayed there for nine weeks, crossed over to the R&B charts, and was named Best Song of the Year at the 2001 Oasis Smooth Jazz Awards. Braun’s awards also include the 2001 Oasis Smooth Jazz Award for Best Brass Player and Best Collaboration with Boney James.

Born in Allentown, Pennsylvania on July 6, 1955, Braun took up the trumpet in third grade, studied with Philadelphia Orchestra trumpeter Seymour Rosenfeld, graduated from Dieruff High School in Allentown, and enrolled at The Eastman School of Music. While at Eastman, he was a founding member of the fusion group called Auracle. Their distinctive style was quickly imitated by a number of jazz groups and their recordings became mainstays on jazz radio stations throughout the northeast.

Braun’s first song to hit the *Billboard* Top 20 was *Here With Me*, written for the rock band REO Speedwagon. As a trumpet sideman, Braun has worked and toured with an incredible list of musicians including Tina Turner, Rod Stewart, Glenn Frey, Natalie Cole, Rickie Lee Jones, and War.

Braun released his first solo album in 1992. It was, however, his time with Sade on her Love Deluxe tour that helped him focus on a unique style. Braun’s second recording, *Night Walk*, has been likened to “listening to Sade instrumentally.” Braun’s big break came on the heels of his third recording, *Beat Street*, which

spent 13 weeks as the number one contemporary jazz album in *Billboard* magazine, breaking a record previously held by Kenny G. *Beat Street* was eventually named the Smooth Jazz Record of the Year. It also won the Gavin Artist of the Year and Album of the Year awards in 1996. Braun’s next release, *Body and Soul*, earned him another Gavin Artist of the Year award. His latest release, *Kisses in the Rain*, has also hit number one on the *Billboard* chart.

Braun has never been busier or happier than he is right now. Offered more playing and producing opportunities than he can possibly accept, he is also in demand as a jazz musician performing in clubs throughout the Los Angeles area. Braun is truly enjoying his time in the fast lane and doesn’t show any signs of slowing down.

TE: Why did you choose to play the trumpet?

RB: One of my older brothers played the trumpet and because of that there was a trumpet in a closet at



home when I was eight years old. As a kid I was into everything, including the closet. I found the trumpet, put the mouthpiece in, and found that I could get a sound out of it. I think everybody who has ever played the trumpet knows that some people can get a sound out of the instrument, and some people can’t. It’s not an instrument like the guitar where you just put your hand over the strings and a sound comes out. My first choice had been drums, but I grew up in a small row home in Allentown and I’m one of six kids, so as you can imagine, I was gently steered away from the drums. What my parents didn’t know was that the

trumpet was the next most annoying instrument for a beginner to play. I didn’t give up much in the way of offense (laughing); I was still able to annoy my siblings!

TE: Did you come from a musical family?

RB: My mother, who is 84 now, is still very musical and has a good ear. She’s a self-taught banjo player. She played a four-string banjo, the really old kind, and



Rick Braun and his mother.

learned piano by herself. On her side of the family my grandfather was a country fiddle player, my grandmother played the piano, and one of my uncles played the cornet. All of the musical talent was on my mother's side. When my dad tried to sing to us kids at night we would pretend we were asleep so we wouldn't have to listen to him. The only song he knew was the *Notre Dame Fight Song*, and he didn't even like Notre Dame!

TE: I have read that you studied with Seymour Rosenfeld. I had the pleasure of interviewing him and was impressed by what a nice man he is.

RB: You know, he really is.

TE: When did you study with him and how was he able to help you?

RB: I started studying with him my junior or senior year in high school, during the early 1970s. We got into some of the more advanced trumpet studies, like the material from the Saint-Jacome *Trumpet Method* and other materials of that nature. He was also the first teacher to introduce me to orchestral excerpts. He wanted me to audition for the Curtis Institute and was really preparing me for that, but I didn't get in. That year they took only one trumpeter from about 100 who auditioned. As it was I ended up at Eastman, where I really wanted to study jazz.

TE: Were there any other early teachers who inspired you?

RB: My first trumpet teacher, Richard Hinkoe, was great. He is still active as a director of one of the Allentown concert bands. My brother told Hinkoe about me and he agreed to teach me. Hinkoe brought me along especially in music theory. His high school theory courses covered collegiate-level material. When I arrived at Eastman I was put in with the advanced placement theory students and didn't learn anything

new. Hinkoe's theory course included solfege, sight-singing, counterpoint, four-part harmonic writing, the rules of contrary motion and correct resolution, dominants, altered sixth-chords, and more! He was an amazing teacher!

TE: Allen Vizzutti has told me what an incredible experience Eastman was for him. What was Eastman like for you?

RB: Allen and I played together in some of the bands at Eastman. He can play anything! I was at a concert where he played one of the Verne Reynolds etudes as a solo. He is just an amazing player. Eastman, on the other hand,

was very tense. It was a nerve-wracking experience. There was one student who developed a nervous habit of pulling out his own hair. I remember during winter midterms one year someone starting lighting couches on fire. That was one side of it. On the other side, it was an outstanding educational experience that was just not for the faint-hearted. It was a highly competitive atmosphere. I had a friend who would get up at 5 a.m. and practice out on the lawn to try to get an edge on everybody else. In many ways Eastman was a humbling experience for me. While in high school, I thought I was the hottest thing around, so I needed to be humbled! The major thing Eastman gave me was exposure to music I'd never heard before, like the music of Clifford Brown, Miles Davis, and Freddie Hubbard. I really started to listen to their playing. I worked to understand the way they played blues changes and how their styles were put together. The education I received at Eastman was exceptional.

TE: Did you graduate?

RB: No I didn't. I finished my junior year and later took some extra classes at UCLA, but some of the guys in Auracle (Steve Raybine, percussion; Ron Wagner, drums; Bill Staebell, bass; John Serry Jr., piano) were one year older than me, had graduated, and were itching to do something. We planned our next step and realized California was the place we ought to be, so we headed west. Steve Kujala (Auracle's woodwind player) and I left Eastman one year early, much to the chagrin of our families. It all worked out in the end.

TE: What happened once you arrived in California?

RB: We landed in a band house in the San Fernando Valley. Steve Kujala, Bill Staebell, Ron Wagner, and I all lived together. John Serry and Steve Raybine lived in another house. We struggled, made two records, and

RICK BRAUN'S SOLO ON:
WESTCHESTER LADY

FROM THE CD CASINO LIGHTS '99 (WARNER BROTHERS 9 47466-2)

BY BOB JAMES

TRANSCRIBED BY VERN SIELERT

FUNK ♩ = 106

HARMON - NO STEM

E-11

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of six staves of music. The first staff begins with a whole note chord, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff continues with a similar rhythmic pattern. The third staff features a more complex rhythmic structure with many sixteenth notes. The fourth staff continues with a similar pattern. The fifth staff shows a change in rhythm with more eighth notes. The sixth staff concludes the solo with a final flourish. There are several slurs and accents throughout the piece. The numbers 3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 14, and 17 are placed below the staves to indicate measure numbers.

20

23

26

29

31

(1-13)

35

38

5

41

B-11

played the Montreux Jazz Festival, which was a big deal. It was fun, we were all good friends, and got a little taste of what it was like to be recording artists at a very early age. Then the whole situation blew up. Our label, Chrysalis, broke up the band after our first recording by signing John Serry to a solo deal. He made a couple of records that didn't sell well while the rest of us went ahead and made our second record. None of us was really up to the task of filling Serry's shoes at that point, and it did not go well. It's the classic story of a record label taking one guy out of a band and destroying the chemistry.

TE: After the band broke up and you found yourself living in California, what happened?

RB: That was probably the darkest time of my career. I was not yet established as a trumpet player. I had some early experiences at session work, but for whatever reason, at that early age, I wasn't able to break into the TV, movie, or commercial scene. I ended up doing odd jobs outside of the music business in order to make enough money to live. I remember being so broke that I wrote a bad check in order to buy food, but ended up taking the food back because I just could not go through with it. I would look at the phone wondering if it was off the hook because nobody was calling. Then, slowly, things picked up. I started to get some gigs playing with Latin bands in East Los Angeles and that developed into steady work. Then I got into playing with rhythm and blues bands and out of that work started touring with War. I also played a lot of bars and weddings, whatever I could find, and joined Jack Mack and the Heart Attacks. They were an R&B band that was very popular on the west coast. As a result of being in that horn section I began working with Glenn Frye and some other well-connected musicians including the guys in Tower of Power. I actually played in their horn section on a Tom Petty record (I played piccolo trumpet on that recording). At some point during that time I hooked up with some of the guys who were in Rod Stewart's horn section and ended up receiving a call to join that band. I had been struggling, and all of a sudden I'm touring the country with Rod Stewart in a private plane, staying at Four

Seasons hotels, and making more money than I ever had in my life. It was both a blessing and a curse. The blessing was that I was better off financially than I had ever been; the curse was that I started to get into drugs and began to drink a lot. On the road there are plenty of ways to get into trouble as far as substance abuse is concerned. The good news is that I bottomed out and sobered up, and that became a major turning point in my life.

TE: Wasn't it a kick to play for so many people night after night?

RB: It was amazing. I think the most people I ever played for was during a show I did with War in Chicago when the first African-American mayor of that city was elected. The city held a huge concert in Lincoln Park with several hundred thousand people. People were as far back as you could see. The columns of speakers went on forever. I've been fortunate; I've played for quite a few people in my life.

TE: How did your association with REO Speedwagon come about?

RB: When I wasn't on the road with Rod, I would come back to L.A. and look for gigs. As part of the Jack Mack horn section I played on an album with REO Speedwagon. The lead singer and writer of REO, Kevin Cronin, and I became friends. Kevin and I had been playing clubs together in a band we had put together with some of the REO Speedwagon guys and some other people. We were both going through hard times over women so I wrote a song about my experience. I had composed it like the Beatles song *Yesterday*, just a series of verses. Kevin heard it and liked it, and was able to come up with a chorus that really fit the tune. He played it for the guys in the band and they loved it. REO Speedwagon recorded it and it went into the top 20.

TE: Can you tell me how your first solo record came about?

RB: I happened to be in Canada on the road with Rod Stewart and through Steve Kujala I had been introduced to Frank Davies, who is a publisher in Toronto, Canada. I met with Frank one afternoon and played him some of my songs. I invited him to come to

the show that night, and it turned out he had worked for Rod way back on his first single. It's a small world! When Frank heard my instrumental material he said he thought he could get me a deal. He took it from Toronto to Burbank, just 30 miles from where I was living, and got me an independent deal with Mesa/Bluemoon. On *Intimate Secrets*, my first record, I included a song called *Theme from the Midnight Caller*. That song got some significant airplay. My next compact disc was *Nightwalk*, followed by *Beat Street*. During this time I went back on the road with Rod. We were in Europe when my manager called and said that, in America, *Beat Street* was getting a lot of attention and doing so well that I was going to have to make a decision. I was either going to have to continue to be a highly-paid sideman or give my notice and take the solo gigs that didn't pay a lot of money but would help me build a career as a leader. I took all of two seconds to think that over. I gave Rod my notice and jumped on a plane back to the States. I was willing to take the risk.

TE: That had to be an exciting time.

RB: It was really exciting. When I first came out with *Intimate Secrets*, the promotion guy at Mesa/Bluemoon was trying to get some airplay for the recording. He told me that many stations would not play it because it featured a trumpet lead. At that time the only horn players getting airtime were saxophone players. I finally broke through when *Beat Street* was released and won Artist and CD of the Year Awards at the Gavin Convention (Gavin covers the American radio industry, collecting and compiling the playlists of more than 1,300 radio stations). *Beat Street* broke Kenny G's record for most consecutive weeks as the number one contemporary jazz record and helped set me up as a solo artist.

TE: You have stated that work you did with Sade was important to your musical development. Can you elaborate?

RB: The Sade tour was important because she helped me establish a style. Sade's whole show is about sensuality. I've never been a blistering lead trumpet player, and that tour gave me direction and helped me solidify the idea that I don't have to be an Arturo Sandoval type of player in order to get my message across. Sade is a minimalist on stage. From that, I realized that what I have to offer as a musician is valid, and as long as I believe in it and I'm committed to it, I can create a musical fingerprint.

TE: (Jazz saxophonist) Joe Lovano once told me that the great artists have a sound that is recognizable in the first three notes. I remember he and I were laughing about the truth to that statement and he said, "Three notes, boom, John Coltrane; three notes, boom, Eric Dolphy."

RB: That is it exactly. Look at Miles.

TE: I read a critic who said that you are the man who reintroduced the trumpet to the contemporary

jazz scene. For the longest time, the only music that was getting played by horn players was by saxophonists. How does it feel to have had that kind of an effect on the music scene?

RB: It feels good that I've got a house I can pay for by doing the thing I love to do. That is the ultimate gift—doing what I want to do for a living. I am amazingly fortunate. I think part of the reason I've been so blessed has to do with timing. When I came out with *Beat Street*, there was a need for another voice. At that time there were only saxophonists like Grover (Washington Jr.), David Sanborn, and Kirk Whalum; George Benson on guitar; and David Benoit and Joe Sample on keyboards. After Chuck Mangione stopped getting airplay, the only other candidate was Herb Alpert, and he had stopped making records with any degree of frequency. There was a window of opportunity and I was fortunate to be in a position to make records. Another thing that happened with *Beat Street* is that people started coming up to me and saying, "Man, I knew that hip-hop beat was going to catch on." Interestingly enough, the production on that album was minimal at a time when bands like The Rippingtons and Spyro Gyra were doing complicated material. *Beat Street* by comparison is really very sparse.

TE: I have to admit I hate the term "smooth jazz," but there are a number of traditional jazz musicians who have been putting out albums under that title; saxophonist Kenny Garrett and keyboardist Rachel Z come to mind. It seems that many jazz artists are going in this direction. I have found that with the best players there is no snobbery in music anymore.

RB: Well, I wish that were true for everyone. We cannot get a decent hearing from any of the reviewers in Los Angeles. The *L.A. Times* has the door totally shut. The reviewers won't even stay for the shows. I had a conversation with one of them who just started slamming the music. I was convinced he hadn't even listened to my record, which turned out to be true. I told him that maybe he should listen to it before being critical. He did go home and listen to my compact disc, and called me back to say that he enjoyed it.

TE: I've let a number of my collegiate jazz students borrow some of your recordings. The other day one of them came by and mentioned how he was surprised and delighted that you find ways to go past stereotypical smooth jazz, both harmonically and melodically.

RB: Last week I played a straight-ahead gig with Gerald Albright on saxophone, Harvey Mason on drums, Dave Garfield on keyboards, and Kenny Wild on bass. We played at the Baked Potato, which is just a little club here in California. We didn't tell anyone we were going to do it, but as often happens, word spread. For me, it is just so much fun to play straight-ahead. And when I practice, I practice that way. I practice scales, flexibility, etc. For me, the way I'm going to improve as a player is by learning how to play changes better. No matter what you have laid out as a solo, you



still have to navigate the changes. It probably sounds simplistic to even mention it in that way, but that's the way it is. It's a lifelong challenge!

TE: Many musicians say it's the struggle that seems to keep them going. They're always looking for the next mountain to scale, pardon the pun, or the next musical peak to climb.

RB: Yes, exactly. Along with that thought, I've always found myself thinking that the moment I'm really pleased with something I've played, I immediately find something else I didn't like. It's really about taking a Zen approach to the music. For me, when I practice, it's about refining the craft, improving my technique, and increasing the number of tools available to me. I'm always working to increase the number

of scales, patterns, and other musical materials which I have available. When I perform I want to approach the music with the Zen concept of not thinking ahead or behind, just being in the moment. That's when I think I'm doing my best work.

TE: Do you still find the time to practice?

RB: Yes, I really do. I don't practice as much as I would like to. When I'm producing, I need to spend a great deal of time with the artist. When working with other artists, there are a number of other things that go into the production, and those things take away from the time I want to spend practicing. When I'm traveling, I'll have to spend the whole day on the road, and when I finally arrive in the hotel it'll be time to sleep. I'll have to go into a big show without practicing

the previous day.

TE: Are there things you like to practice on a daily basis?

RB: What I'll try to do now is find patterns of five or six notes that I really like and then explore them, fully develop them, interpolate them, and run them in all key areas. I'm trying to build my musical vocabulary. I also like to play the piano. Having an instrument that allows me to think of harmonies in a non-horizontal way helps to visualize what's going on underneath the melody. Another thing, and I'm not ashamed to say this, is that part of my practice is done to the Jamey Aebersold recordings. For the most part, when the music is recorded with a live band, as opposed to when it sounds like it was sequenced, it is absolutely great. I have a studio here at home, and I'll transfer a track like *Joy Spring* onto my hard disk, set up a microphone, and lay down several tracks. Then I'll go back and listen critically. I try to understand where my problems are and then work to improve my weaknesses.

TE: What advice do you have for young musicians?

RB: Here's what I did that was a mistake. When I was at Eastman, I used to go to the practice rooms in the basement where everybody would walk by and hear you. I'm a natural ham. I always wanted to sound good and to impress people, so I would play the first couple of bars of *Brandenburg No. 2*. I couldn't get through the whole thing to save my life, but I had the first entrance nailed! I think kids need to know that you have to practice what sounds bad. Play the material that sounds the worst, and practice it the most. Of course you want to play stuff you can play well, and I do too, but instead of always playing in F minor, play in B minor or F-sharp minor. Instead of playing a blues scale, work on the Lydian chromatic concept and Mixolydian scales. One of the things I did when I was learning the trumpet was to take the Clarke *Technical Studies* and incorporate them into as many different scale forms as possible. Early jazz education is usually restricted to major, minor, and diminished. Rarely do you learn about altered or Dorian scales until you get to a more advanced level. By adapting the Clarke studies in a variety of ways, you create a big toolbox. If major and minor are the only scales that are second nature, you will be limited. It would be like fixing a car with only a wrench and a screwdriver. You'll soon find that you need more tools!

Equipment

Mr. Braun plays a Getzen trumpet and flugelhorn from the custom series. His trumpet has a cryogenically treated bell. His mouthpieces are from his own signature series by Marcinciewicz Music Products.

Selected Discography

Solo Discs:

Kisses in the Rain (Warner Brothers, 2001)
Full Stride (Atlantic, 1998)
Body and Soul (Bluemoon, 1996)
Christmas Present: Music of Warmth & Celebration (Rhino, 1994)
Beat Street (Bluemoon, 1994)
Night Walk (Rhino, 1994)
Intimate Secrets (Mesa/Bluemoon, 1992)

With Others:

Gabriela Anders

Wanting (Warner Brothers, 1998)

Marc Antoine

Madrid (NYC, 1998)

Auracle

City Slickers (Chrysalis, 1979)

Glider (Chrysalis, 1978)

Avenue Blue and Jeff Golub

Nightlife (Atlantic, 1997)

Naked City (Bluemoon, 1996)

Philip Bailey

Dreams (Heads Up, 1999)

Brian Bromberg

You Know That Feeling (Zebra, 1997)

Norman Brown

Celebration (Warner Brothers, 1997)

Chris Camozzi

Suede (Discovery, 1999)

Colour Club

Colour Club (JVC, 1994)

Peppino D'Agostino

Close to the Heart (Mesa, 2001)

Venus over Venice (Mesa, 1995)

Dakota Motor Co.

Welcome Race Fans (Myrrh, 1994)

Richard Elliot

Chill Factor (Blue Note, 1999)

Event Horizon

Theta (City of Tribes, 1997)

Fastball

All The Pain Money Can Buy (Hollywood, 1998)

Selected Discography (Continued)

- Jeff Golub
Dangerous Curves (GRP, 2000)
Out of the Blue (Atlantic, 1999)
Avenue Blue (Bluemoon, 1994)
- Marty Grebb
Smooth Sailin' (Telarc, 1999)
- Warren Hill
Shelter (Discovery, 1997)
- Bob James
Playin' Hooky (Warner Brothers, 1997)
- Boney James
Shake It Up (Warner Brothers, 2000)
Boney's Funky Christmas (Warner Brothers, 1996)
Seduction (Warner Brothers, 1995)
- Al Jarreau
Tomorrow Today (GRP, 2000)
- Akira Jimbo
Flower (ULG, 1997)
- Eric Marienthal
Easy Street (Polygram, 1997)
- Johnny Mathis
In the Still of the Night (Columbia, 2001)
- Joe McBride
Double Take (Heads Up, 1998)
- Michael Paulo
Save the Children (Noteworthy, 1994)
- Tom Petty
Southern Accents (MCA, 1985)
- REO Speedwagon
Life as We Know It (Epic, 1987)
- Bonnie Raitt
Fundamental (Capitol, 1998)
- Steve Reid
Water Sign (Telarc, 1996)
- Jeff Robinson
Any Shade of Blue (Wild West, 1998)
- Thom Rotella
Can't Stop (Telarc, 1997)
- Bryan Savage
Soul Temptation (Higher Octave, 1998)
Cat Food (Elation, 1996)
- Dan Siegel
Hemispheres (Playfull, 1994)
- Slim Man
Secret Rendezvous (Ges, 1997)
- Chris Standring
Velvet (Instinct, 1998)
- Rod Stewart
When We Were The New Boys (Warner Brothers, 1998)
Spanner in the Works (Warner Brothers, 1995)
Vagabond Heart (Warner Brothers, 1991)
- Third Force
Collective Force (Higher Octave, 2000)
Vital Force (Higher Octave, 1997)
- Tin Drum
Real World (Bai, 1996)
- Tina Turner
What's Love Got To Do With It (Capitol, 1993)
- Stanley Turrentine
Do You Have Any Sugar? (Concord, 1999)
- Gerald Veasley
Soul Control (Heads Up, 1997)
- Peter White
Perfect Moment (Sony, 1998)
Songs of the Season (Sony, 1997)
Caravan of Dreams (Columbia, 1996)
- Willie and Lobo
Siete (Narada, 2000)
Wild Heart (Atlantic, 1999)
Caliente (Atlantic, 1997)
Music of Puerto Vallarta Squeeze (Mesa, 1996)
Between the Waters (Atlantic, 1995)
Fandango Nights (Rhino, 1994)
Gypsy Boogaloo (Mesa, 1993)

About the Author

Thomas Erdmann is currently the director of bands and associate professor of music at Elon University, North Carolina. He has earned degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (D.M.A.), Illinois State University (M.M.), and the State University of New York at Fredonia (B.M.P, B.M.E.). Erdmann is a trumpeter and pianist who has performed throughout the east and midwest regions of the United States.