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RAY
ANDERSON
Lifetime of Buzzing

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RAY ANDERSON

A Lifetime of Buzzing

BY JEFF CEBULSKI



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If you think about “Jazz Musicians Who Embody an Instrument’s History,” one candidate who fits the category is the indefatigable trombonist Ray Anderson. Anderson, who grew up in the hot bed of Chicago jazz and was inspired by trad jazz, took up the trombone as a matter of intense personal expression. After learning his craft in elementary school alongside classmate and fellow trombonist George Lewis, he went on to develop a personal style reflecting practically all the roles and modes of trombone performance, from old-timey blues to backing the likes of experimental composer and saxophonist Anthony Braxton to everything in between.

Recently, his old classmate (and friend to this day) Lewis shared this anecdote about those early days and Anderson’s composition “Buzzing”: “At our very first trombone lesson, way back in 1960, Ray Anderson and I were inadvertently performing the ‘extended technique’ of blowing air through the instrument. Nothing was coming out—at least, nothing one would associate with the trombone’s stentorian character—*God’s Trombone*, according to 11th century saint and polymath, Hildegard von Bingen. Our teacher, Mr. Frank Tirro, watched us with no little amusement. Then he said, ‘To play the trombone you have to engage in buzzing.’ He demonstrated the technique, first with his lips, then with the lips on the mouthpiece attached to the trombone. The sound was nearly deafening. And we were off to a lifetime of buzzing!”

“Buzzing” is as useful a metaphor to describe a career that has attracted generations of musicians and fans for over a half-century. As a king bee of SUNY-Stony Brook’s jazz studies program in Long Island, Anderson (who is also the Vice President and co-founder of Stony Brook’s The Jazz Loft jazz museum and performance space) is ready to buzz around again, having retired from full-time teaching (he turns 72 next month). “I just love all those [Stony Brook] people, but I need to go back to being the performer that I was before 2003,” he says. The trombonist has released two albums as leader plus a handful as sideman in the last two years and is again playing live with some regularity in New York (including six concerts this month alone!), including one local date in anticipation of an upcoming European tour with his new trio, Treeomtree, about which he says, “So far, pretty much everything we’ve done has been entirely improvised... more groove-oriented, a lot funkier [but] not free jazz in that sense.”

Anderson is also finishing a new book (*Popcorn Moment. A Guide to Musical Improvisation*), which describes his methods for stimulating creativity and encouraging individuation, the process of developing one’s own unique voice. “It’s not a ‘how to play jazz’ book. It welcomes all genres of music and prioritizes none. It’s about the skillful use of sound to communicate with other musicians and the audience. For example, to start an improvisation class I created an exercise where three volunteers stand up and play ‘the worst music ever,’ because the first thing you must do, to become successful at improvising, is free yourself from the interior voice that wants you to do everything correctly.” The book also addresses the distinction between musical technique and music itself. Anderson explains: “We all work hard to develop technique, but a bigger vocabulary does not guarantee a better poem. I encourage everyone to make time to practice *music*, the direct expression of emotion,

in addition to the technical studies.” He adds, “It’s easy to teach technique because it proceeds in a linear fashion from simple to more complex exercises, but the book’s goal, developing expression, is not linear, it’s circular. The ideas in the ten chapters are all valid all the time: they are like the spokes of a wheel that all connect to the same hub.”

Courage and curiosity are two words that mark the trombonist’s personal history. He was fortunate enough to attend the University of Chicago’s private lab school, which gave him access to top music educators, but his first impressions were formed by listening to his father’s trad jazz records—“It sounded like fun.” Chicago also offered the opportunity to discover jazz from several angles. Anderson remembers, “Occasionally the father of the trumpet player in our little lab would take us down to the Plugged Nickel on a Sunday afternoon when it was legal to get kids in there, so I heard Miles Davis, Elvin Jones, Horace Silver. What an incredible education!”

Lewis, a longtime member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and author of its definitive history, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, credits Anderson with introducing him to the AACM via visits to various musical happenings around town, especially on Chicago’s South Side, where people such as veteran Chicago tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson held sway. Certainly, the two trombonists formed a mutual admiration society. “I’m flattered to think I did George any good. He’s one of our leaders in every sense.” Of Anderson, Lewis says, “Ray is certainly one of the most amazing trombone players I will ever hear in my life. He is a real fighter with incredible tenacity and love of music; but the incredible ease that seems to flow out of him belies the intense amount of work and introspection that his music requires. When I hear him, all I can say is: ‘How does he do it?!’”

Eventually, Anderson moved to California where he continued his own studies. A move to NYC and freelancing came in 1972. He caught a break when Lewis offered him a chance to replace him in Braxton’s quartet. Along with becoming closely associated with drummer Barry Altschul’s various groups, Anderson quickly began to attract attention as a versatile and well-respected collaborator. Gary Valente, one of the four trombonists in the trombone-only ensemble Slideride, shared his time with Anderson: “That first lineup was Ray, Craig Harris, George Lewis and myself. What a great band. We made a beautiful record, *Slideride* (hat ART, 1994), toured and gigged through the ‘90s into 2000. Around that same time I also started playing with Ray in the George Gruntz Concert Jazz Band. He was featured in front of the band on vocals and trombone and killed it! We also did David Murray’s Big Band tribute to Duke Ellington’s 100th birthday. Slideride was the trombone section in that band and we had a ball.” Over the years Anderson has formed lasting relationships with other musicians as well, arguably none closer than two of his longest associations in bassist Mark Helias and drummer Gerry Hemingway. The two are the other members in the BassDrumBone trio, which is in the midst of its 47th year together and whose new album *Afternoon* (Auricle) was recently released.

Both Helias and Hemingway credit bassist Mark Dresser as a key person in connecting them to Anderson. As Helias recalls: “Dresser, who was living in New Haven at the

time, had invited Ray to come up to play—so the community of musicians there, particularly myself and Gerry, met Ray and got to play with him. We had an immediate connection that remains to this day. Ray exhibited an unfiltered energy and enthusiasm for making music that was infectious and bestowed permission on others to just go for it. (Once) we were doing a workshop/residency in Sweden. Ray took five or six high school kids, some of whom had played their instruments for only two years and didn’t know much about jazz or improvising, and within two hours had them playing a New Orleans-style blues in a convincing, energetic way (and) he did it with pure energy and enthusiasm.” Hemingway adds: “One spring morning in 1975 I stepped out into my rear yard and heard an amazing trumpeter, wailing so fast and furiously I was entranced with both the sound and the musical invention. I followed the sound and realized it was coming from Dresser’s house. I was met by Mark, who introduced me to his friend, Ray Anderson, who had indeed been playing, but I had mistaken the range of his playing to be from a trumpet!”

Anderson’s style, which he laughingly recalls being described as “raucous,” is clearly on display in his recent solo recording, *Marching On* (Doublemoon). While it’s easy to think that the soloist is winging it on stage, the trombonist says that’s not necessarily the case. “If you just have that one instrument and that one player, it can become pretty predictable. So I’m trying to make this both expressive of everything that I want to say and at the same time something that people can come and enjoy listening to—those are compositions to begin with. Every one of them is different because I have heard solo concerts where I feel like there’s not enough contrast in the music to actually keep me fascinated.”

The dichotomy of learning and creating continues to rule Ray Anderson’s world. “I’m basically self-taught. Forty years after I graduated high school, I got a B.A. degree through Empire State College, where you can get credit for your life experience.” He adds, “I love the many paradoxes contained in music. In order to please an audience, artists must first please themselves, but no artist is ever truly pleased. What we have instead is, as Martha Graham said in her letter to Agnes de Mille, “a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching”... and buzzing.

For more info visit rayanderson.org. Anderson plays solo at *Silvana Sep. 7* and *National Jazz Museum in Harlem Sep. 26*. He is also at *Bar Bayeux Sep. 14*, *Soup and Sound Sep. 15*, *Harbor Jazz Festival Sep. 21* and *Scholes Street Studio Sep. 29*. See *Calendar and 100 Miles Out*.

Recommended Listening:

- Anthony Braxton—*Performance (Quartet)* 1979 (hatOLOGY, 1979)
- Ray Anderson—*Blues Bred In The Bone* (Enja, 1988)
- Ray Anderson Pocket Brass Band—*Where Home Is* (Enja, 1998)
- Ray Anderson/Bob Stewart—*Heavy Metal Duo (Work Songs & Other Spirituals)* (s/r, 2004)
- BassDrumBone—*Afternoon* (Auricle, 2023)
- Ray Anderson—*Marching On (Solo Trombone)* (Doublemoon, 2023)