

Randy Sandke – In a Metatone

Frank van Nus



Randall "Randy" Sandke (1949) has gained fame in Europe mainly as a trumpet player on the Concord, Arbors and Nagel-Heyer labels, playing traditional and mainstream jazz. At the same time he enjoys a reputation with his American colleagues as one of the most versatile and effective jazz trumpet players of the moment. Dick Hyman calls him when he needs a 1920s sound like Bix Beiderbecke's, and none other than Benny Goodman called upon him in 1985 to play the parts of Harry James, Ziggy Elman and Chris Griffin in his big band. You might also want to call Sandke if you're looking for someone who can perform roaring 1950s be-bop Dizzy Gillespie style, 1960s and 70s fusion jazz, or 1980s neo-bop. By comparison: the average professional jazz

Musician, composer, author

trumpeter has usually specialized in one style, and can "do a few things" in one or two other styles. But Sandke does it all, on a constantly high level. For the past 30 years he has worked with a long list of top musicians. His bio/discography looks like a "Who's who" of professional American jazz, with the names of Benny Goodman and Michael Brecker topping the list. Sandke's playing is admired and lauded all-round, but there is still one area where audiences and critics alike appear to be lagging: Randy's own music. This concerns the compositions he writes and plays, employing his own "metatonal music" theory. Not that this technique is a recent phenomenon: as early as 1985, Randy recorded his metatonal

composition *Brownstones* for his first solo album, *New York Stories*. But it has proven a difficult job to sell this avant-garde form of improvisation to critics, organizers and the general public. In short, where he succeeds playing traditional jazz, swing and be-bop, he has a much harder job selling the music closest to his heart. What's going on here?

Sandke was born in Chicago. Together with his trumpet playing brother Jordan he discovers the music recorded by Armstrong and Beiderbecke, moving on chronologically to Dizzy Gillespie, Clifford Brown, Miles Davis and Freddie Hubbard. Randy studied with legendary classical trumpet player, teacher and trumpet builder Renold Schilke. At the University of Indiana he meets tenor sax player Michael Brecker (1949-2004). Nineteen-year-old Randy and Mike play together in their own rock band, which Randy describes as a jazz-oriented version of Blood, Sweat and Tears. He quickly establishes himself as a trumpet player, but when he's asked at age 21 to join rock singer Janis Joplin on a tour, he has to say no: a sudden hernia of the throat makes it impossible for him to play, and the next 10 years he has to earn a living in New York as a guitarist, playing music he describes as "not very satisfying". Next chapter.

In 1979, after 10 years of guitar, a trumpet playing friend persuades Randy to ignore the hernia and to pick up the trumpet again. To Randy's amazement, he succeeds - not only that, but within six months he is back at his former professional level. This triggers great relief, but also confusion: if he can play the trumpet now, what on earth has he been doing for the past decade playing guitar? The reborn trumpeter's first gig is a replacement job with Vince Giordano's band. Randy and Vince hit it off, and for the next 10 years Randy remains a member of Giordano's Nighthawks. His deep roots in traditional jazz prove to be a blessing, since playing this music on a high level allows Sandke to earn a living as a performer. He

becomes part of the upper echelon of New York's mainstream scene, providing him with concerts, studio dates and tours.

When Benny Goodman hears Randy on a tape given to him by Bob Wilber, he invites Randy to do a small band gig. The perfectionist Goodman likes what he hears, and leaves a message on Randy's answering machine: thanks, nice job, hope to work with you again. Sandke took the tape from the machine, and has held on to it ever since. A few months later, just before the recording date of Randy's first solo LP, he is asked to join what would be Benny Goodman's last big band. The following year sees weekly rehearsals, and about six concerts. These make for juicy stories on Goodman's eccentric and unpredictable behavior ("Benny was always a nice bunch of guys"). Goodman was known to be egocentric, demanding and uncommunicative, but when Sandke asks him whether he would have hired Bix Beiderbecke if he'd been alive in 1935, Benny answers: "You mean, would he have hired me?"

During this period Randy works in relative quiet on a new approach to composition and improvisation, which he will later name "metatonal" - beyond tonality. In his own words: "scales and tonality are dispensed with, yet harmony still serves as a basis for form and melodic improvisation". He thus aims to bridge the gap between harmonic

improvisation (based on chord progressions) and free jazz. When Sandke's first solo album, including the metatonal *Brownstones*, is released in 1986 on the Stash label, he announces in the liner notes that his next album will be devoted fully to this new technique. That too will turn out slightly differently. Record labels Concord and Nagel-Heyer keep calling on him, resulting in a large stack of CDs, but these are all filled with relatively accessible swing, mainstream and be-bop. Only as late as 1998, Concord releases the appropriately named CD *Awakenings*, giving Randy free reign to put into practice his own metatonal theory as a composer, arranger and soloist.

In 2002 Second Floor Music publishes the book *Harmony for a New Millennium*, in which Sandke explains his metatonal theory. The book's jacket is filled with blurbs by the most prominent of colleagues, such as Mike Brecker and Jon Faddis. The book is followed by Concord CDs *Inside Out* (2003), *Outside In* (2005) and *The Subway Ballet* (2006). Published privately are *Trumpet After Dark* (2005) and *The Mystic Trumpeter* (2005), the latter containing a suite inspired by Walt Whitman's poem by the same name.

But Sandke has always remained loyal to his first love, classic jazz. He knows Bix Beiderbecke's musical legacy like no other, and in 1996 he publishes the booklet *Observing a*

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Genius at Work. In 50 pages of text and 27 pages filled with 85 notated music examples he explains how Bix played, improvised and composed - compulsory reading for anyone studying Beiderbecke's music. This work is still available as part of the Annual Review of Jazz Studies, part 9, 1997-'98. In the year 2000 Randy records a number of gems in Nagel-Heyer's studios: *The Rediscovered Louis and Bix* contains 15 tunes known to have been recorded by either one of Randy's heroes, but subsequently rejected by the recording studios. In 2003 the Arbors label releases *Celebrating Bix!*, for which Peter Ecklund harmonized a number of Bix's solos to be

played by three cornets. These solos are played by Randy Sandke, Jon-Erik Kellso and Randy Reinhardt, but there is still plenty of room for improvising. Sandke's improvisations show that of these three cornet players, he gets closest to Beiderbecke's amazing sound and harmonic thinking.

As the CDs on the Concord label show, the past 15 years have provided Randy with more opportunities to attract attention for his own music. But he has been made to wait for this for a very long time, having to watch as avant-garde savvy critics and organizers seemed to be interested mainly in his colleagues. Why? In 1987 Randy handed two copies of his *New York Stories* album to jazz critic Gary Giddins, asking if he would give one of these to his colleague Stanley Crouch. Being the jazz musician and the color blind progressive he is, Randy's jaw must have hit the floor when Giddins answered: "I'll give it to Stanley, but you're white". Excuse me?

What on earth had Randy walked into here? It became painfully clear that a number of American jazz critics didn't use just their ears, but their eyes as well - the kind of people who cannot grasp the fact that Louis Armstrong didn't give a Swiss Kriss about the color of your skin: black or white, yellow, blue or purple with green specks - as long as you were a good person, preferably a good jazz

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musician. A colleague told Sandke that a promotor had once asked him if he knew someone who could play like Randy, but possessed a dark skin. The heads of some American jazz critics, organizers and promoters proved to house an inbred racist streak, decreeing that white musicians do not belong in jazz.



In his book *Where the Dark and Light Folks Meet* (Scarecrow Press, 2010) Randy closely examines where, when and why this fixed idea originated, and how jazz musicians have dealt with it. Sandke convincingly presents jazz as an original American art form, and moreover not as a model of racial division, but as one of unity. The surprising result reminds me of historian Maarten van Rossem, who likes to introduce the dissection of a paradigm by asking: "And is this true, ladies and gentlemen? No, this is not in the least bit true!" Predictably, a number of fierce polemics ensued, in which Sandke was accused at best of simplification, and at worst of self-interest and historical falsification. The truth is that he had expertly struck a nerve; a number of conservative jazz bloggers and commentators are still quivering in their digital spider webs, as if an oversized bumble bee has flown straight through. To his credit, the amiable Sandke always responds to these critiques with grace and courtesy. Unsurprisingly, in these discussions he always mentions that he does not regard himself as the sole possessor of truth, whilst his opponents have already dug

themselves in, triumphantly waving a typo in one of the book's quotes. Not only a great musician and an intelligent writer, this Randy, but a nice guy as well.

- Randy Sandke performs in Wageningen (NL) on October 19, see page 7.

Note of the editor



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