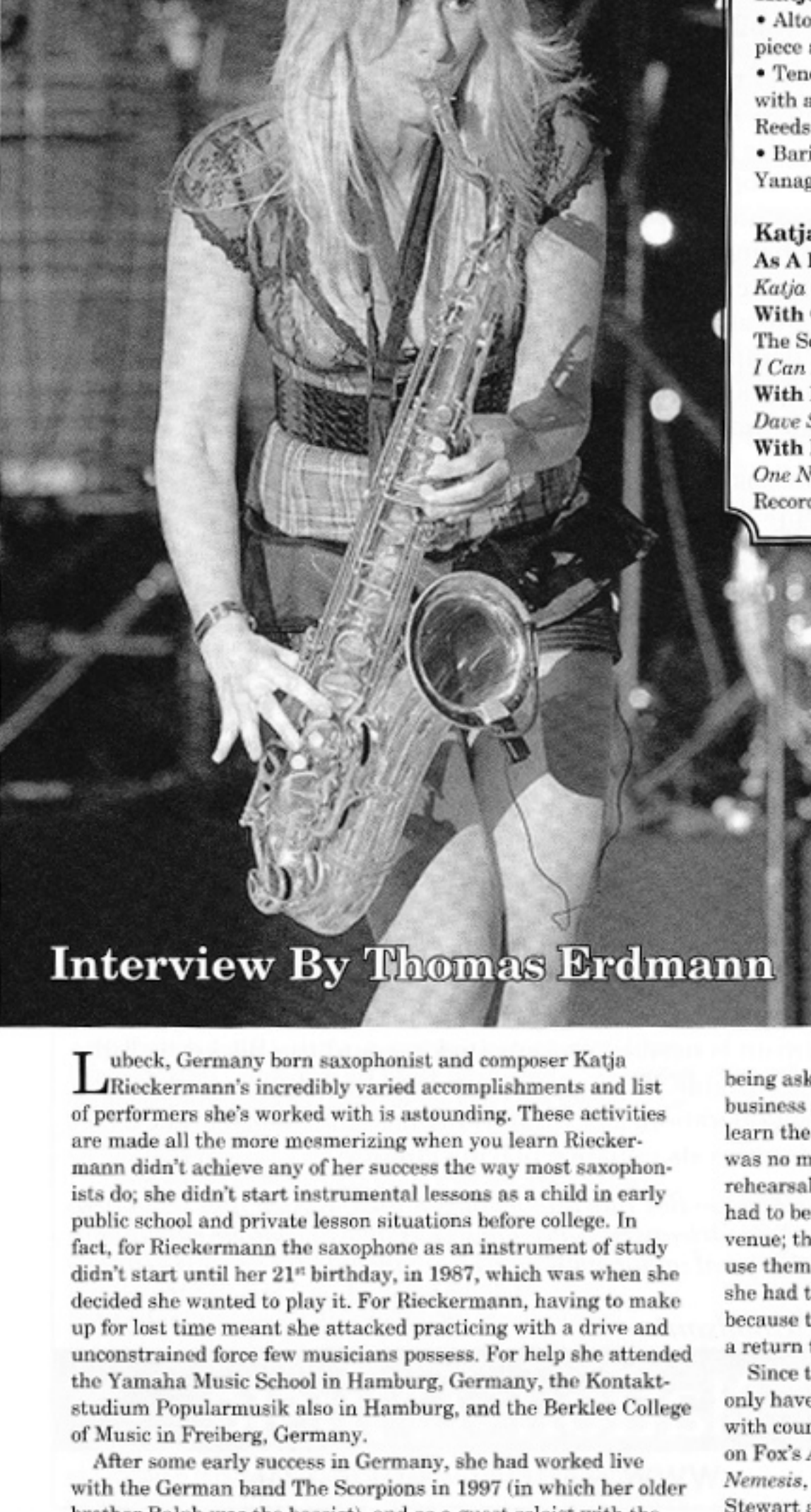


Katja Rieckermann



Interview By Thomas Erdmann

Lubeck, Germany born saxophonist and composer Katja Rieckermann's incredibly varied accomplishments and list of performers she's worked with is astounding. These activities are made all the more interesting when you learn Rieckermann didn't achieve any of her success the way most saxophonists do, she didn't start instrumental lessons as a child in early public school and private lesson situations before college. In fact, for Rieckermann the saxophone as an instrument of study didn't start until her 21st birthday, in 1987, which was when she decided she wanted to play it. For Rieckermann, having to make up for lost time meant she attacked practicing with a drive and unconstrained force few musicians possess. For help she attended the Yamaha Music School in Hamburg, Germany, the Kontaktstudium Populärmusik also in Hamburg, and the Berklee College of Music in Freiburg, Germany.

After some early success in Germany, she had worked live with the German band The Scorpions in 1997 (in which her older brother Ralph was the bassist), and as a guest soloist with the

Canadian rock band Saga on their Scandinavian tour. Rieckermann decided to move to the United States permanently in 1998 following Ralph's move there in connection with his band. Upon arrival in Los Angeles she got early gigs in Hollywood jazz-venter act and keyboardist Jeff Goldblum's heavy band, "The Mildred Snitzer Orchestra," but three years later Rieckermann, who was still practicing hard, found herself still living gig to gig.

One night her friend Andy Hess, of the Black Crowes, brought her to a popular musician's hang in L.A. where she met Carmine Rojas, musical director for Rod Stewart. She gave him a demo CD, and the event at the time, seemed to be just another one of those countless moments you meet other musicians and never expect anything to happen in return.

For Rieckermann, however, this one incident led to an audition two weeks later, and subsequently being asked to join Stewart's band. Then the reality of the music business set in; Rieckermann not only had only three days to learn the entire show from a live tape of previous shows, as there was no music to practice from and there weren't going to be any rehearsals, but she also had to do it on borrowed horns as they had to be placed on the trucks and sent ahead to the first concert venue; thankfully she was able to keep her mouthpieces and use them during that three day period. To make matters worse she had to settle her financial affairs in those same three days because the tour was to last for three months with no time off for a return trip home.

Since then Rieckermann's life has flourished in ways she could only have dreamed about. In addition to Stewart, she has worked with country music stars Brooks & Dunn, had a recurring role on Fox's *Ally McBeal*, appeared in the feature film *Star Trek: Nemesis*, played for the Queen of England, worked with Dave Stewart and his Rock Fabulous Orchestra, ex-Beach Boy Brian

Katja Rieckermann's Equipment

- Alto Saxophone - Selmer Mark VI with an Oleg #7 mouthpiece and soft Bari Plastic Reeds.
- Tenor Saxophone - a Cannonball and a Selmer Mark VI with a Guardal #9 mouthpiece and medium Bari Plastic Reeds.
- Baritone Saxophone - Selmer Balanced Action with a Yanagisawa #9 mouthpiece and soft Bari Plastic Reeds.

Katja Rieckermann's Selected Discography

As A Leader
Katja (Digital Zoo, 2007)

With Others
The Scorpions
I Can See Your House From Here (Aeronaud, 2002)
With Dave Stewart
Dave Stewart Songbook, Volume 1 (Ada/Surling, 2008)
With Rod Stewart
One Night Only: Rod Stewart Live At Royal Albert Hall (J-Records, 2004)

Wilson, Thelma Houston, Aimee Allen, Rue Paul, hit producing king David Foster, and jazz artists Tom Scott, Sal Marquez and Arturo Sandoval. Rieckermann has also worked with country star Reba McEntire, blues great Johnny Lang, and Hollywood music hotshot Randy Newman. As if this isn't enough, she is also fluent in four languages. Anything Rieckermann has achieved has come from her own hard work and sweat. There's a lesson in Rieckermann's story for all of us; it's never too late to reach for the stars if you're willing to devote yourself, heart soul and mind, to your passion.

I've been asking saxophonists lately about their choice of instrument. With all of the great saxophones on the market today, you've recently started playing a Cannonball tenor as well as a Selmer. Why did you choose to add a Cannonball to your equipment setups?

I was introduced to the Cannonball a couple of years ago when they were very new in the market. It's a great alternative to a Selmer. I love the sound; very rich, and great for rock 'n' roll. They also have some great designs and are quite affordable.

You didn't pick up the saxophone until you were 21, but your brother is a musician. Do you come from a musical family?

Not at all. As a matter of fact my parents didn't want me to do music. I wanted to start playing piano and saxophone when I was about 12, but since my brother was already a musician, he's older than me and started to play the guitar when he was 12, and since he was a wild rock and roller my parents thought, "If children make music then they get wild," so they wanted me to be more of a serious player and kept me away from playing an instrument.

You started to learn the saxophone as an adult. What advice would you have for others who are adults and want to learn an instrument?

If you want to do it professionally, which at that time I did want to do even though I had no musical background whatsoever, you have to really want it because, obviously, you'll have a lot of catching up to do. You'll have to practice very hard.

What kind of a practice schedule did you put yourself on in order to so quickly gain the proficiency you have?

From the beginning I couldn't say I would become a professional musician because I wasn't even able to play a C major scale. After a year I was able to play all the scales and I started to understand music theory a little better, but I only, in the beginning, practiced for an hour or 90 minutes every day. I started with some lessons, easy stuff, so I could understand the saxophone, but then after a couple of years, when I decided I really wanted to become a professional musician, I quit everything else to focus on music. I had previously attended university and graduated after studying English. Then I went on to study media dist., but I always put in the time to practice.

When I was practicing the saxophone I was always thinking about how I should be studying at the university, and then when I was in the library at the university I was always thinking how I really wanted to be practicing the saxophone. At one point, after a couple of years, I said, "You know, I'm just going to try to pursue this music thing," so I found a job as a secretary. See, when I was 21, at the same time I started to play the saxophone, I also went to school to learn how to become a foreign language secretary in four languages. I did that for a year, but later, when

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I wanted to devote myself to music, I found a part-time job for four hours a day and spent the rest of my time on saxophone. I approached the saxophone like work.

Then after a couple of years of doing that and supporting myself as a secretary, I got a gig playing in a band and was barely able to support myself as a working musician. The band was a very successful marching band and we worked every weekend. I was able to support myself with those gigs but not in any kind of a big time lifestyle, but I was able to get by. So I quit my secretary job and was able to put myself, for the next two years, on a practice schedule that allowed me to work on the saxophone for eight hours a day. I put myself on a tight schedule. For example, I would practice such and such for 45 minutes every day, and then for the next 45 minutes I would practice something else, and so on.

It's obvious, from listening to you, that you have great ears. Did you do special ear training studies?

No, I didn't, and I don't think my ear training is that great. I played by ear at times, but in the beginning my theory was not that great. Actually I'm catching up on that now.

How did you study improvisation when you were starting out?

That was up to my teacher. I was taking lessons once a week and through the lessons I was doing the typical Abersold materials.

You eventually worked live with The Scorpions in 1997, and then with the Canadian rock band Saga on their Scandinavian tour.

Yes, but let me explain these gigs. My brother was the bass player in The Scorpions, and they asked me to play saxophone on a cover of an Elvis Presley number they were doing. That was my only appearance with them, just a one-time thing. With Saga my boyfriend, at the time, was touring with them, so I was on tour with the band only because I was with him. I had brought my saxophone on tour so while the band was doing sound checks I would go into the bathroom and practice. The keyboard player at the time also played clarinet and had a clarinet solo during the concerts. He said, "You should come up on stage and jam with us." So that was how I played with them.

From smaller events have careers been made. When you moved to Los Angeles did you move in with your brother because he was already there, and did he help you make musical contacts?

Yes I did. My parents had bought a house in Los Angeles. Following a tragedy in the family my father sold the company he was running and decided to buy a house in America. That was the reason to come. I came over here just to visit, but my parents had already furnished me with my own bedroom and bedroom in this really nice beautiful home they had purchased. While here my brother introduced me to all of these amazing rock musicians, like the guys in Guns N' Roses and Toto. The whole rock and roll crowd is not very jazzy, which is interesting because at that time I was still practicing Coltrane. But I got to jam with those people and loved it, so I decided to move full time to L.A.

Were you also going to jam sessions at the same time?

When I first moved here I didn't really know anybody, so for the first two years I would get up in the morning, practice for a couple of hours, then at night I would find a bar or a restaurant and introduce myself to the band. I'd say, "Hey, I'm Katja, I just moved here, can I sit in with you?" I got to know a lot of people that way.

I had the opportunity to interview Los Angeles and Hollywood studio trumpeter

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Chris Tedesco. He said there is plenty of work to go around to the musicians in the area, if you're talented, but that a lot of young musicians who show up in town make mistakes that leads them to washing out rather quickly. What advice would you have for other saxophonists who want to move to Los Angeles and try to make it in the music business?

I think he's referring to attitude. The only advice I can give is that I think the best thing you can do if you want to make it here is to do what I did. You have to get out and meet people and play and play and collect phone numbers and give out your phone number. You also can't change your phone number every year; keep the same one. I've had the same cell phone number every year since I bought my first cell phone. Even though I've moved a lot I keep the same number and I will get calls from people I met 10 years ago.

Have you run into a lot of musicians with attitude problems?

Yes. People treated me differently after I got the gig with Rod. When they found out I got that gig they, all of a sudden, were very friendly and respectful, but before that they were, "Uh, yeah, who are you."

One of the early gigs you got was playing in Jeff Goldblum's jazz band.

It wasn't like a gig, though it was for a second. I would always go and sit in with those guys. They had gigs and I would go every week and play a couple of numbers with them. I got to know a lot of the guys in the band and would hang out with them.

I read that the way you were hired into Rod Stewart's band was that you gave a demo to Rod's musical director and that started a chain of events. At that time were you giving your demo out to a lot of different people?

Actually, I wasn't. I've always pursued the writing of my own material, nothing very fancy, but music that includes my own ideas. I had just recorded three of my own tunes and just happened to have the disc with me. Nothing really ever happened with those three tunes because I never pursued the smooth jazz market because, and to be honest here, I never really liked that music. My music was always a little more edgy, but I had just finished the disc and happened to have a little press release in my car and I gave that to Carmine Rojas.

After you were hired to play in Rod Stewart's band you didn't get any rehearsal time with the band.

The thing is that they had already hired a girl saxophone player. When the tour started they had a guy and there was a problem with his attitude. He was a great player, but he was hard to get along with on the road. On the road it's all about

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the music in short a short time span?

That's a good question. I just listened and learned the parts. I used to transcribe solos all the time when I was younger, listening to them and learning them by heart. I think my training from those transcriptions came in handy. I had developed a good ear, could memorize parts and learned songs. My ears had really improved from when I first started working on ear training in my early lessons.

I interviewed Rick Braun a few years ago. He had played with Rod and not only loved working with Rod but also loved the whole experience. At one point Rod even featured Rick in concerts. What is your experience with Rod like?

He's been amazing to me. He's been incredible and really supportive, and was really proud when my CD came out. He was so nice. He'll announce my name after my big solos during his concert, and put the picture of my CD cover up on the big screen. He'll say, "Yes, she just released a CD that you can purchase at Merchising." I average 50 or 60 CD sales a night; because if you have 15,000 people in an arena and everybody sees it you get some good sales. He's been amazing, generous and supportive.

With Rod you've played at a lot of prestigious venues as well as a number of high profile gigs. I was wondering if you could talk a little about the schedule and behind the scenes things you have to do when you're on some of these gigs. For example, when you performed with Rod on The Tonight Show With Jay Leno, what time did you have to arrive at the studio and what was that day's schedule, even though you're just doing one number on the show?

That's a 9 to 5 job. It's a whole work day. You get there about 10 in the morning. You have a sound check and sound rehearsal with the microphones at 11, then the artist comes in and you run the tune once or twice for the camera. Then you have lunch, do makeup, and then the taping is not until 5 or so. You tape and then you're done.

Is it the same kind of schedule when you appeared on Dancing With The Stars?

They're all kind of similar. Those gigs are pretty much, all day things. Today, for example, when we do the early shows like *The Today Show* or *Good Morning America* or *The View*, those are usually faster. Call times are very early; *Good Morning America* has a call time of 5 in the morning. It's brutal. The taping is at 8, but then you're out of there by 9.

When I interviewed Jessy J, she said the one thing she is so impressed with and that most people don't think about is how much work goes into being a star singer. She mentioned that when she Jessica Simpson people didn't realize how much time Jessica puts into getting ready for concerts and TV shows with hair and makeup and fans, as well as all of the work she puts into her line of clothing. Do you see all of the extra work Rod does that most people aren't familiar with?

I think it's a little different with males and female artists. Rod usually shows up after us. For a woman it's more work because of the beauty part, which takes a long time.

You played with Rod for the Queen of England. In the United States there are all sorts of security issues for those involved in playing music at an event where the President is going to attend. Was there anything about that performance or that day's schedule that was handled differently because of her presence?

It was tight security, but there weren't that many people around. If I recall it was at Windsor Castle, but I'm not sure because we've done a bunch of those types of gigs. We've also played

very proud of it because he'd see a little embarrassed by it. But I gave him the CD to see what he thought. Also on the disc were some of the other tunes I had. This was one month before we went on a big three year tour. The next day he comes back to me and I says, "This is amazing. What are you going to do with this?" I said eventually I was going to try to put out my own CD. He said, "Well you should sell this at merchandising."

That was an opportunity of a lifetime. How amazing would this be? So I called J.C. and told him what Rod had said regarding selling my CDs on Rod's tour. We only had one month to finish the CD because the tour was slated to begin in one month, but I also had to rehearse with Rod everyday that month.

So in that month I went to rehearsal with Rod everyday during the day, and then every night I went into the studio and J.C. and I recorded the last five tracks on the CD. Then I went on tour and J.C. did the mixing and mastering of the disc by himself, because I was on the road. Also while on tour I organized the guy who did the cover; it was all handled fast. Three weeks later I received the first shipment while we were in Chicago, and that was when I started selling the CDs. So all in all, there was really no concept behind the first five discs.

Still, it all works together. J.C. is a big name producer in the smooth jazz market. What did he bring to the project on the tracks where you worked with him?

He made me sound really good. I didn't have that much experience with sound that would sound good, and he made me sound much smoother than I would have aimed for. He has a lot of experience with that kind of market.

You're currently working on your new solo CD, and I understand it's going to be more dance oriented.

Yes, it will be completely different. It will be "electro-house" and very European sounding. I'm recording it in Europe. I'm actually going back to Germany on Sunday to finish the disc. We have seven tracks and they're almost done. I'll go back for 10 days and hopefully finish the project.

As you're doing the new project and as you're recording it, is there anything about the process that surprised you, that you weren't expecting as you were putting the music together?

This kind of music is much more complex and complicated than you would think. It sounds like just a groove, but there is so much more to it. I'm finding that it takes much more time to do this than my first record. There are hardly any live instruments on the new recording, except of course for the saxophone. It's all about the right sounds, and those sounds change every couple of months. For example, the bass drum sounds change in this kind of music change every couple of months. You have to stay current.

When you find yourself playing on top of recorded beds of electro music, as opposed to playing with or on top of acoustic

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on.

I may be more sensitive to this than other teachers because as a college teacher I've designed and continue to teach a course in Women In Music, but in a number of articles I read about Rod's concerts you're referred to as a tall, leggy blond. In one article you were even referred to as "the sexiest saxophone player to ever hit the concert circuit." Have you ever faced discrimination as a saxophone player because you're a woman in a mostly male dominated instrumental category?

Yes. I used to always have a problem with that. In the first couple of years people would come up and say how amazing I was, even though I knew I wasn't; I knew I wasn't a good saxophone player and they were only saying that because I'm pretty. That made me sad. But then I turned it around and decided to play with what I have, it's a plus. To be honest, I don't think I would have had the Rod Stewart gig if I didn't have the legs.

Well, getting the gig is one thing, but they wouldn't have kept you around and in the band for so long if you were not a great saxophonist and musician. Lauren Sevian, a New York based saxophonist, told me she got tired of guys hitting on her because she was the only woman saxophone player in many of the bands she was playing in. Did you have to deal with that as you were coming up in the business in L.A.?

Probably, but I wasn't hit on that much by the co-musicians. It was probably because I'm European and my attitude is that of being one-of-the-guys. For me I think it was about how I fit into the guys' world.

You've also played with a number of other bands, such as Francesca and the Flames and Branscomb Richmond and the Renegade Passes. How do you prepare yourself as you move from one band and style to another band and a different style?

I always study the next band's music really carefully, as well as the recordings of music they're playing. Then I'll play along with the band's recordings. I take a lot of time to carefully prepare myself.

You play a lot of outdoor concerts. How do you deal with changing from hot to cold and from really rainy and humid to dry?

It's really hard. I don't like to do it, and it really affects the tuning of the horn.

Do you have any advice for others who find themselves in similar situations?

I wish I did and that I could say something to help them. It's hard. Many times I'm behind the stage warming up on cold days, and then by the time I actually get to play the horn on stage the

who you are, and can people hang with you; are you a friendly person. Because of this Rod said, "Well, maybe we should get a girl." So they hired a girl the production manager knew. So they did rehearsals with her before the second leg of the tour. When I met Rod's music director, Carmine, this had already been set up; he was the girl and had scheduled 10 days of rehearsals with her. On the last day of those rehearsals Rod decided he wanted a different saxophone player. That's when I came in, after all those rehearsals had been completed and were over and the band was to start the second leg of the tour in three days...

Once hired you only had three days to learn the music to his show from just tapes of the concerts. As a way to help others who may find themselves in similar situations, or don't understand how the real world of music works, what process did you use to learn all of

for Prince Charles a couple of times. I don't really remember because they all get very blurry and I have a horrible memory. Sometimes I forget things. I've done a bunch of high profile gigs, but there is nothing anymore special for those than any of the other high profile gigs.

You've also played with Brooks and Dunn. How did that come about?

That kind of happened by accident. I was cast for the video of the song, *You Can't Take The Honky Tonk Out Of The Girl*; it's more of a rock 'n' roll song. You can see it on YouTube. When I got there to do the video shoot, they know how it is on a video shoot and how it takes forever and there is a lot of waiting around, well I didn't know anybody and was just standing there so I started to play a little bit because I got bored. Then one of the leaders of the band came to me and said, "You really play?" I said "Yes." They thought I was just an actor or model and somebody put a saxophone around my neck. They were cool and wanted to know who I played with. I mentioned Rod and they were impressed and said, "You know we might call you because we're going to do these TV shows, *The Today Show*, *The Country Music Awards* and *Show* and *The People's Choice Awards*," and we'll need a sax player. They don't normally carry one in the band because the saxophone is not a country music instrument. So that was how I got in with the band on those TV shows, but I never really did a concert with them.

In preparing for those gigs was there a difference in the way you approached the saxophone in playing in front of the country band as opposed to when you're with Rod?

No, because that song is more of a rock and roll song. It's a cool rock and roll song, not really country.

I want to ask about your solo recording, which is really great. Your playing on "I'm Not In Love" has a big deep and at times almost Texas tenor growl to it. When I read your list of influences I didn't come across Illinois to Jaquet, Buddy Tate or Ronnie Laws, but I was wondering if they and that big Texas sound were part of your early influences?

I play also on that number, but that sound is totally part of my influence. I love Ronnie Laws.

When you went into the studio was there an overriding concept you had in mind with regard to what you wanted the end product to be?

Not at all. I'll tell you how it all happened. I started working with J.C., Jeff Caruthers, as a producer, and we started with the cover tunes first, "Casa Blanca" and "Reminiscing." We did those just for the hell of it, because he really wanted me to do a smooth jazz album because he's one of the big smooth jazz producers. We started slowly because there was really no budget involved. Then it got put on hold; we had two tracks done. Then a year later I went into the studio all by myself, hired some musicians and produced two of my own tracks, songs I wrote, "Tribute To Michael," and "And Then There Was Harry."

And then there was Harry, you are an incredible songwriter.

Thank you. That was the first time I worked as a producer, telling the guys what I wanted them to play, blah blah blah. For me it was trial and error. So now I have four tunes done, but my two new tunes really have nothing to do with the songs I did with J.C. Then I had the idea of covering Rod's *Do You Think I'm Sexy*. So I did that with J.C. after that it was finished I went to Rod and gave him a CD with that cut on it. I told him I had covered one of his favorite songs; he doesn't exactly hate it, but he's not

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Virtuoso
By RS Berkeley

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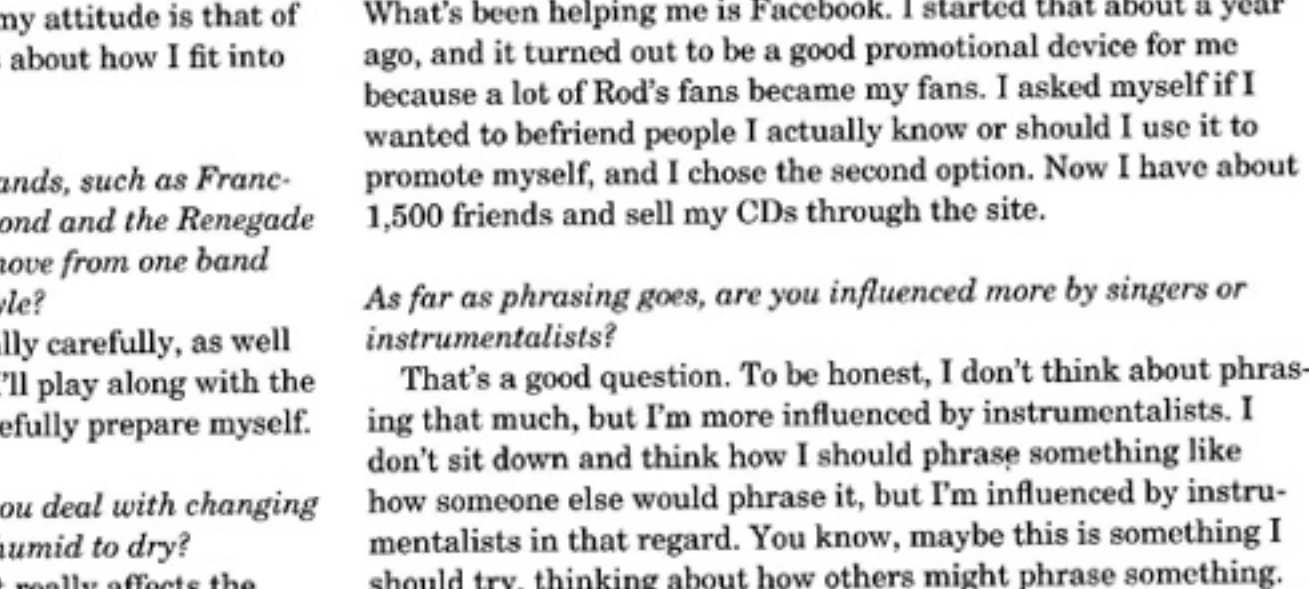
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