

## Ralph Lalama

By Eric Nemeyer

**JJ:** What is it about musical improvisation that you find so valuable? What does it offer to you, your band-mates, and the listeners? What motivates you and drives you forward?

**RL:** Life is one long solo. And each life is unique. So what I strive to bring to my improvisation is my life experience, both on and off the bandstand. And to musically accomplish this, one gathers a lot of knowledge by delving into both the craft and the art. It offers to me a stream of expression as to where I am in my life at any given moment. To my band-mates, I hope that it offers inspiration to receive and reflect ideas that will help them express themselves. To the listener, I hope that the combination of all of this leads to an appreciation of the jazz ideal, intangible though that may be. One of the things that motivate me is the feeling of the split-second decision-making of your feelings and knowledge, which means that you have to decide quickly which way to go, rhythmically, harmonically and melodically. Of all the living and learning that you've done, you could go a lot of different ways at any given moment, and in the heat of improvisation you have to be instantaneously clear. And that takes a lot of energy. And another part of the motivation is the moment that you're improvising is the interaction between you and your band-mates, and the give-and-take of the audience. Sometimes when I look out at the audience and I see the bobbing of their heads, it rhythmically inspires me and drives me forward.

**JJ:** What was it that initially inspired you to pursue playing sax and woodwinds?

**RL:** When I was nine I started on the clarinet. My grandfather actually gave me my first clarinet because he was a clarinet and alto sax player himself. And I remember opening the case and smelling the wood of the clarinet and that really tickled my fancy. I started playing and practicing the clarinet and started digging the sound of the wood. Then at age 14, my parents bought me a tenor saxophone for Christmas. I took it out of the case and knowing the clarinet somewhat, I started playing the saxophone right then and there because I knew some of the fingerings. It just so happened that in the house we had some Sonny Stitt and Stan Getz records. They attracted my ear as to how the instrument should sound. With my father being a drummer, up to that point I had listened to these records mainly focusing on the rhythm section and the beat. But from that moment on I shifted my focus to the melody and harmony. Still, in retrospect, the focused listening of the beat really helped my saxophone playing and style, even to this day. And then listening to Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane and Joe Henderson really expanded my understanding of the possibilities in playing the saxophone, that there was no

end to the number of things one could artistically express. And I continue that search today.

**JJ:** When you first embarked on the sophisticated journey of becoming an improvising or jazz saxophonist, what were some methods that you found extremely useful to achieving your goals? (Perhaps something that you developed on your own or your favorite instructional resource)

**RL:** At the beginning, I just listened a lot. I remember enjoying not just the melodic and harmonic content, but also really digging the ride cymbal and the bass. Then, when I started trying to improvise, I remember my rhythm was closer to being together than my harmonic and melodic ideas. So to try to remedy *that* problem, I started trying to find the notes and the phrases by transcribing, and at this age of 13 or 14, I accomplished a little bit but my ears weren't that sophisticated yet. So I started practicing scales and chords, not only for technique on my instrument, but also just to hear the difference between major and minor. Once my ears and technique were better, I started transcribing more diligently and started acquiring a deeper understanding of the extensions of the chords, i.e., the sharp-elevens, thirteens, etc. Through transcribing, I started to check out the expansiveness of the sound of the instrument. I remember dealing with the Sonny Rollins record, "Newk's Time," and trying to emulate his sound and in the process my jaw hurt for about six months. Because of this, I discovered an exercise for sound that I use even to this day. It's a series of long tones, with the articulation "ha-ta-ta" that I call "The Isometric" and a series of quarter notes in intervals of seconds and fourths, that I call "The Aerobic." Time has shown me that it gives the sound more highs and more lows, which is a vertical spread, versus a horizontal spread.

**JJ:** As an artist, your state of mind and ability to dig deep is important. Outside of playing, what do you do to decompress, re-center and find peace of mind?

**RL:** I'm not a super diverse person, so my answer to this will be pretty straight ahead. I mean, I'm not a multi-layered type as a whole in many subject matters, but I try to exercise my diversity in a few choice subjects. First, I dig sports, specifically football and baseball. Not only do they help me relax, but when I think about it, sports kind of relates to what I do because it's all about performing and staying within yourself but always trying to nurture your talent. Next, listening to music; this exercises the mind and soothes the soul. I can't help but absorb what I listen to especially when I hear something well communicated that affects me where I want to communicate



just as well. Third, I dig following politics because I'm into debate and discourse and people airing their opinions. Sometimes it's a bit of an overload with all the multi-media, but I like to sift through all the B.S. and scream at the TV. Lastly, hanging with my wife, Nicole, because we discuss, analyze and enjoy getting involved with all these things together, and we like to cook together, too, especially our homemade marinara sauce. If I don't have sauce in the house, I don't have peace of mind.

**JJ:** As a musician, what do you feel your role or responsibility is in our society? Is what you do something only for you and the musicians you are sharing the stage with, or are you trying to achieve something outside of that microcosm?

**RL:** Without a doubt, I was born and blessed with some musical talent. Thanks to my family, this gift was nurtured and I feel a sense of responsibility to share something positive through my music. I think society and people need the sound of music in their lives, because I think music is a part of survival and the human spirit. It's an unquenchable expression of who we are. It's more than just the arts and entertainment section of the newspaper. It's integral to our day-to-day lives.

**JJ:** What is the greatest compliment that you can receive as a musician?

**RL:** The greatest compliment I have received is when somebody has heard me – on the radio, for example – and says to me, "Ralph, in three notes, I knew it was you."

**JJ:** What is the most rewarding facet of your life as an artist?

**RL:** Well, one of the things I like is traveling around the world and meeting people from all walks of life

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[www.ralphalama.com](http://www.ralphalama.com)

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love of doing it. If you're inspired to keep learning you will keep growing. Checking out new music and interacting with other musicians and creative people in general are critical facets of development. You have to keep all of that at the forefront. The second thing is being able to superimpose all of that into the business of life. To be able to survive in the music business you have to be versatile and able to network yourself. It's important to go to clubs, listen to people play, make friends, and be open to getting together and playing together. I have often recommended that young players start a band with their musician friends and see where that takes you. I also think it's important to

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means if you are a musician, from the age of 14, 15, you continue education but you're avoiding physical education. In Eastern Europe, you could not pass through the first two years of conservatory if you did not go twice a week to physical education."

In describing two of his most acclaimed patients, Tatz lays bare the complex relationship that musicians often have with their own health and occupational hazards. "I was lucky to work at the same time with Isaac Stern and Yehudi Menuhin," he says. "This was while I was in Israel. They both came at the same time. For two weeks I was working the same day [with both]. Menuhin was physically very weak but he was very flexible. His interest in yoga made him very flexible. Isaac Stern was very strong but so tight.

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and learning from their culture and the rhythm of their language. And, being an improviser, the rhythm of the world can really factor into what I'm playing at any given moment. It's a great experience to apply all that I've studied and practiced and developed, in fresh, new and different contexts. It's also rewarding to connect everywhere with the jazz community – meeting artists all over the world and their interpretations, lifestyles and regional style. The Texas sound on the tenor is different from the L.A. sound. The New York sound is different from someone from Italy or Japan. It makes for a beautiful mosaic of sound. Sometimes I think life is too short to absorb it all.

**JJ:** What are you currently working on and what is on the horizon for the near future?

**RL:** In a musical sense, I'm still working on sound and technique on my saxophone, and I'm getting more involved in harmony, because I still like working on chord changes, more of the super-impositions and substitutions. This may be hard to convey, I quite don't understand it myself, but I'm trying to make the sound, sound brighter, using the dark partials of the chord.

As to the more concrete part of the process, I'm currently trying to acquire a grant, with the assistance of Rob Derke and Peter Cobb. Rob Derke is the Artistic Director of the New York Jazz Initiative and Peter Cobb is a former lawyer and saxophone student

be around musicians that are better than you as it makes you rise to their level. All of the heavyweight musicians that we recognize as masters have been very driven...they just never stopped growing. They have spent tens of thousands of hours practicing, performing and developing their styles and techniques. Sometimes you may find yourself in a musical situation that may not seem to be the most creative music but it's with solid players such as a Broadway show, cover band or some seemingly mundane musical. An example of implementing this advice for improvement might be: If you are playing in a cover band and you want to improve. I would recommend learning all aspects of the songs from being able to play the

I've had luck with Isaac over thirty years to see what happened, and with Menuhin less – ten years. In the end of his life, Menuhin was still conducting, playing less; his tremor from Parkinson's was very bad. And Isaac, he was so stiff, he developed arthritic problems." Tatz continues, "It is very hard to tell Menuhin or Isaac Stern something to do. They think, 'I am famous, I am rich, and I know everything'. It's very hard. With Rostropovich, he listened to me, not fighting. Finally he told me, 'How can I do this? Today I am in New York. Tomorrow I am in Paris. Next week I am in London, and later in Tokyo. Look at my schedule.' I told him, 'Maestro, but your body doesn't know your schedule. Your body needs this and this and this.' Later, you pay the price."

Over four decades and three continents, Shmuel

of mine at NYU who encouraged me to strive for such a project. The "project" is me doing a program that I call "Mad About Thad," where I will perform a number of Thad Jones compositions in a variety of fashions, perhaps strings, vocals, octet setting, saxophone trio setting, but all centered on the phenomenal artistry of Thad Jones.

**JJ:** Could you talk about your experiences and conversations with Thad Jones, and how he impacted your artistry?

**RL:** I met Thad Jones at Youngstown University in Youngstown Ohio. He was there for a concert and a two-day clinic, performing with the YSU jazz ensemble, of which I was a member. One of the things that remain in my memory was Thad saying, "There are no stupid songs, just stupid people." Then he sat at the piano and masterfully voiced out beautiful tones on a few "stupid songs." And I also remember him saying that he learned harmony listening to his brother, "Hank," modulate. After that master class he did some playing, and I was lucky enough to play with him. That was an incredible experience, just to try to hang in there with him. The night of the big concert I was assigned by the leader of the band, the late, great Tony Leonardi, to go pick up Thad at his hotel. So I knocked on the door. Thad let me in. He wasn't quite ready yet. So I just made myself comfortable in his room, and I noticed a score spread out on the bed, and I asked him, "Thad, what's this?" And he replied, "It's

melody and harmony not only on your instrument but on other instruments. Another great study is to find the original recordings and transcribe the original parts and be able to play them better than the original... I remember something that my great teacher and mentor, Jerry Coker, once told me while we were driving together to perform a show on Miami Beach. I expressed to Jerry that this wasn't a very creative gig and he said... "On any gig, you're at your instrument and you're playing your instrument, and that's where you always want to be. Grow within that framework." I've never forgotten that as he reminded me that whatever one is doing, you can grow within that situation. ■

Tatz has shaped an extraordinary, benevolent legacy of healing not just the bodies but also the spirits of innumerable artists and athletes of all stripes. Body Tuning as performed by Tatz requires not only the science of physical therapy, but also the art and charisma that naturally seem to emanate from the practice. Tatz offers his own simple but revealing take on his work. "If you want to feel better, take Advil. But if you want to solve the problem, get on the table, and we together, you and I, we can find the problem and solve it." ■

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*For more information about Shmuel Tatz, please visit [www.bodytuning.us](http://www.bodytuning.us).*

a tune I'm working on. It's half of an arrangement of 'Little Rascal On a Rock.' Four months later, when I moved to New York, which Thad encouraged me to do, I was fortunate enough to be in the studio to hear the finished version recorded of that composition. And I was in New York for only three weeks when Thad asked me to do a three-day engagement with him in a quintet setting, with Mel Lewis on drums, George Mraz on bass and Walter Norris on piano, and Thad. Need I say more about what that meant to me? As you know, Thad and Mel broke up in the late 70s and by the 80s I was a member of the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra. And we went on tour in Europe. One of the gigs, we opened for Count Basie and at that point in time, Thad was the leader. Before the gig, the late bassist, Dennis Irwin and I, witnessed for the first time since the break-up of their band, Thad and Mel see and embrace one another. There was no animosity there. Now the next night, Basie was off and Thad stayed in town, and the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra was playing at a club in Stockholm. After the set was over, I saw Thad and he spoke to me with very positive words. That was very reaffirming and uplifting for me, because he was the one of the strong forces that encouraged me on my path. And to this very day, I still appreciate Mr. Thad Jones.

**JJ:** Could you share a few stories about being on the road with the big bands of Buddy Rich and Woody Herman?

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**RL:** Woody's band was my first upper echelon big band jazz gig. I got it a year after I moved to New York. I was recommended by Harold Danko, who was Woody's former pianist (and is now the head of the jazz department at Eastman School of Music). One of the things I learned from Woody is that a leader must trust you; not only about being there and showing up on time, but really trust you with the music. That experience made a lasting impression on me. Also, the Woody experience led me to some lasting friendships. People like Joe Lovano, who I had already had met years back at the Smiling Dog Saloon in Cleveland, Ohio, Joe's home town. But that friendship really grew in Woody's band, and then really grew even more through the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra. We're still close friends today, and I'm proud to be a member of his nonet. I met Danny D'Imperio,

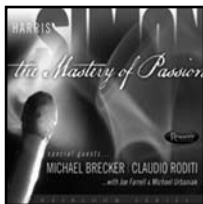
Woody's drummer at the time, and ended up doing about five CDs with Danny as the leader. The bass player at the time was Rusty Holloway, and we just reconnected last September (2008) where he's now teaching at the University of Tennessee Knoxville; we got to do a clinic and concert together (along with my wife, Nicole) and after all these years, Rusty still holds that swinging beat I remember from Woody's band. I don't know if I'm really answering your question but I guess what I'm trying to get across is that the camaraderie that exists in those kinds of situations of being on the road together, they last a lifetime...which leads me into Buddy's band. I joined Buddy's band at the recommendation of his lead alto player, Andy Fusco, and I do have a story to tell about this band. But let me preface it by saying that Buddy used to have a disc problem in his back and in the midst of a tour he was feeling a ton of pain and I

knew that by watching him try to put on a shirt. He would be in obvious agony; so much agony that on one tour he invited Mel Lewis on the bus to be ready as a back-up in case he couldn't play. But Mel never played a beat. So it was amazing to me that Buddy could play through all that pain. Now, fast forward a little bit. We were at Ronnie Scott's in London for a week. I developed the flu with a high fever and felt miserable, especially with all the smoke in the place, in those days. So Andy Fusco and Steve Marcus went to Buddy and said, "Ralph's sick. Should we get a sub?" And Buddy's reply to that was, "Is he DEAD?!" Under normal circumstances, I would have been a little perturbed by that reply, but having seen his example of what it meant to play through pain or illness, I instead respected him. And I did play that gig after all...thus, a positive "Buddy story." ■

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And just when the boogie-woogie spirit lulls one into a two-step stomp, well, salsa takes over and the listener is in the world of *montunos* with repetitions both lively and dreamy, again inviting the hypnotic musings of minds in the 2-3 clave mood. Here Scott takes on the role of percussionist and Desi Arnez commentator.

*Cool Mood Now* is a fine project and demonstrates what talent and initiative can perform and produce. "Not to be missed!" would be this commentator's recommendation.



## HARRIS SIMON

**THE MASTERY OF PASSION** – Resonance Records HCD-2009. [www.resonancerecords.org](http://www.resonancerecords.org). *Wind Chant; Swish; Midday Dreams; Factory; Don the Don; Stonehenge; Romance of Death; City Light; All Points South; Loufiana; Street Song*

**PERSONNEL:** Harris Simon, piano, Rhodes, harmonica; Michael Brecker, tenor saxophone; Claudio Roditi, trumpet & flugelhorn; Bill Washer, guitar; Mike Richmond, upright and electric bass; Brian Brake, drums; Vocal Jazz Inc. (Ann Lang, Janice Pendarvis, Lani Groves); Juilliard Strings; Joe Farrell, flute (10); Michael Urbaniak, violin (3); Andy Laverne, synthesizer (9, 5); Scott Hardy, guitar (2, 11); Rato Harris, bass (3); Grady Tate, drums (3); John Riley, drums (2,11); Portinho, drums (1, 7); Guillermo Franco & Escola de Samba, percussion (1)

By Herbie Y. Gamura

This album just blew my mind. George Klabin and Resonance Records keep on releasing these incredible CDs – in fact, Klabin will only release some-

thing incredible because he is not in this business to make money. Klabin has been capturing some of the greatest moments in jazz recording history since the mid-sixties, and he had left the business in the 80's when he saw mainstream jazz dying, and the recording industry becoming something he didn't want to be a part of. He then went into another business where he found success while remaining an avid jazz fan. Some years ago, he returned to the scene out of pure love and desire to help represent, promote and record under-recognized musicians who are creating incredible music. He also has an archive of incredible material from the past that he is either releasing for the first time, or re-releasing, and Harris Simon's *The Mastery of Passion* is the perfect example.

This CD features a 21 year old Simon in complete artistic ecstasy, joined by a dream band of dream bands for his first record. Klabin had loved what he was doing and invited him to record in 1978, but it was Klabin who was in charge of the session, and who decided what and who would go on the record. Simon says, "I didn't really have much control, which made sense. You really didn't want to give a kid that age too much control. So they picked the tune and musicians, pretty much. I was basically put in the studio with these guys and it all came together in the studio."

Well, Klabin brought in quite a super group – a young Michael Brecker on tenor, Brazilian trumpet virtuoso Claudio Roditi, Brazilian drummer Portinho, the incredible electric and upright bassist Mike Richmond, guitarist Mike Washer and many, many more, including the Juilliard Strings Orchestra, numerous background vocalists and other special guests.

This album is just full of excitement from every angle – the arrangements, the rhythms, the variations in mood and style, from Brazilian to straight ahead ballads with a full string orchestra to progressive fusion sounds to straight up funk. The improvising from all parties is respectively at its very best. There was some special fire in the room at the time of the recording that is undeniable from the very beginning. Brecker's playing is as passionate and fearsome as ever, but the playing of everyone is right there with

him. Bill Washer and Scott Hardy play some incredible guitar, with a clear single-coil tone that I wish was used more often today in jazz. Mike Richmond's bass playing propels the band with such power. His solo on "Romance of Death" is legendary – featuring both his voice and his bass. The combination of sounds and the textures created on this disc, with the various background vocals, the Fender Rhodes, the percussion instruments and other effects makes for such a wide sonic palette and a diverse listening experience.

For many listeners, such as yours truly, this is my first taste of Simon, and to think that he is only 21 during this session is a lot to swallow. This is a very special recording that captures a vibrant and unique moment in jazz history, a sound that is both of that time, and timeless.



## JOHN STEIN

**RAISING THE ROOF** – Nica's Dream; Moanin'; A Child Is Born; Elvin!; Invitation; Vivo Sonhando; Vivo Beautiful Love; Wild Woods; Falling In Love With Love. [www.JohnStein.com](http://www.JohnStein.com)

**PERSONNEL:** John Stein, guitar; Koichi Sato, keyboards; John Lockwood, acoustic bass; Zé Eduardo Nazario, drums and percussion.

John Stein has reconvened his favorite teammates for another round of swing. Since his last outing two years ago, *Encounterpoint*, Stein must have been plotting for a second installment. This disc was well worth the wait.

The album begins explosively with "Nica's Dream," with Stein's boppish lines, John Lockwood's propulsive bass, and the driving ride cymbal

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