

Brubeck, Rachabane, Fourie — Our Early Lives in Jazz **by Dr Michael J. Rossi**

During a panel discussion at the 2001 Jazz Festival in Grahamstown, Darius Brubeck, Barney Rachabane, and Johnny Fourie offered a truly global view on the jazz art form. Their common love for jazz is the thread that spans continents and cultural backgrounds.

=====

Johnny Fourie

It's certainly fascinating to see and hear the common link between us, which is jazz music, the different paths that we followed to get to this table this morning. It's so diverse, it's unbelievable. My story is that I was a very unlikely candidate to be a jazzman. I was born in the North-Western Cape, in a little one horse town and I lived my first eight years or so on a farm, a real farm boy, you know? I never saw electricity until I was about seven or so. I fell off a donkey and broke my arm and they took me to Kimberley Hospital and I saw an electric light bulb for the first time. So the earth is very deeply in my roots.

Anyway, on this farm they used to have parties from time to time, and being completely of Afrikaans stock, the parties involved a lot of Boeremusiek: concertinas, accordions, guitars and drums. I remember being very fascinated by the idea of making music, especially the drums really threw me. But anyway, my mom was an accordion player and my uncle played the guitar; my dad messed around on it. I think I was four or five years old and I wanted to play, but they wouldn't let me touch those instruments. So I used to go out on the werf (farmyard), which is outside the house, get myself a plank and a rubber band and string the thing over, knock it in with a nail here, and I was making some music that they (my parents) didn't know what was coming out. So the pull for the music started pretty strongly there. At about nine years old we moved up to Gauteng, which was called the Transvaal in those days, and we settled in a town outside of Johannesburg called Benoni where I discovered the cinema. Especially on a Saturday morning I used to take my six pence, which was about ten cents or something, and you could pay to go in the cinema and have a red cold drink or a green cold drink and sit there all day watching cowboy movies. So I discovered the singing cowboys, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Monty Hale and the country singing music in there; some wonderful, wonderful players, you know? I was amazed, completely captivated. By this time I managed to talk my mom into buying me a guitar and she bought me my first guitar and I was away singing those tunes and playing for myself. The guitar was used for accompanying the singing. 9, 10, 11 ... 12 (years of age) one day I put on the radio — I must have put on the wrong station all this time, but I had a nice idea of country singing, and it's good, it's pretty jazzy. I'll keep this, I won't speak about the ups and downs of society and humanity, I'll just tell you about my story about the music. One day, I was about 12 years or maybe 13 years old (and) I put on the radio and I heard the George Shearing Quintet playing a tune called "Little White Lies," which I could sing to you now, but I won't. It was like an explosion, I could not believe what I had just heard. I was so fascinated with my first jazz. It was a beautiful quintet of the blind piano player George Shearing, a young lady called Margery Hines on the vibraphone, my first guitar player in jazz, Chuck Wayne on guitar. They played a very integrated, orchestral type of thing together and I think I rushed out that day and got the 78 shellac of this song, straight to the radio grand and I think by that evening I could play the guitar part that Chuck Wayne played (starts singing tune) — I had it down and that was it. That moment changed my life, my whole existence, everything that I think about; nothing more important than

that, you know? I was bitten by the bug. Anyway, in Benoni then in very quick succession I discovered more American musicians, especially guitar players like Barney Kessel (this is now the late '40s early '50s), who was one of the top American guitar players. A guy called Tal Farlow, another gentleman called Jimmy Rainey; they were really the greatest in the world. I proceeded to just buy those records, put it on the record player and take it one bar at a time until I could play that, then the next one, and next one ... It took me about a year or so and I could play pretty mean jazz guitar. I don't play much better now than I played right there, when I was 14 or 15 years old. And so everything suffered because of that; I was supposed to be a doctor, a lawyer, I was quite a clever student at school. Everything fell away; this happened during Standard 7; at the end of Standard 8 I pulled myself out of school. Bit of arguments with the folks; luckily they were great; they let me go without too much fuss. I took myself to Johannesburg and I became a professional musician at 14½. I played the first year in a club on Saturdays; they paid me about 6 rand out of which I could afford a flat and I had 10 suits in the cupboard — cheap ones. I used to dress myself up every morning and go into the music stores and go and jam. I jammed with lots of our black brothers there. We used to meet with lots of guys, earlier guys, and I was just the bee's knees. So I was developing along those lines and becoming quite good and that first year was a bit of a struggle. Once a week really wasn't enough and it was in a Boere band and I had to play Boeremusiek. I was then offered a gig in Port Elizabeth playing six nights a week, which was going to pay me eighty rand a month; that's a lot of money at that time. I came to PE (Port Elizabeth) and played up at the Sky Roof and things were going really beautifully for two weeks. Then one evening the old man, who was the band leader, a very famous Afrikaans band leader, called me up to his room and fired me for playing too much jazz in the Boeremusiek. So they put me on the train that Saturday morning and that Saturday night I then decided well the hell with these Afrikaners you know, I'm going to play English music. Through some friends of mine and with some help that Saturday night I did my first gig in a night-club in Johannesburg. At that time there were about 12 night-clubs in the city, that's where everything was all happening and the night-clubs were places where people used to go and dance. It would start about nine o'clock in the evenings and go to about two or three o'clock in the morning. Over the weekends it would be till five; you could see the sun come up. The music they liked to dance to was Standards, American Standards, that's what dancing cheek to cheek (was about.) I started there and I really learned my trade in that place and that's why I love standards to this day; it's my deep roots. Got married when I was about 19, had a baby and I was playing very good now; very, very confident; the earth, the world was my oyster. This friend of mine asked me one day if I would like to go to London playing on a boat with free passage to entertain some people who were going over and coming back by plane, so I said, "Yeah, that would be great." So I went over on the boat, we hit London and that Friday evening I heard a wonderful standard of musicianship there. I thought this is the place for me. So I came back on the plane; it took three days to get back here, a very old-fashioned plane. I gathered my young wife and little daughter, who was three years old and we booked on the ship two months later to go over there. I had two hundred rand in my back pocket, the wife and baby, knew nobody in London — just blind faith and we went to London. My wife cried for two weeks straight; she thought we were going to perish there. I managed to get a gig in a restaurant playing with an old Eastern European guy who was about my age now; he was (then) about 60. They were paying me 30 pounds a week or a month, I can't remember clearly, and it was he and myself playing in a place called the Blue Boar Inn which has connotations to Robin Hood. I had to wear leather leggings; he played stuff like ah, a rip, rip, rip, dit, dit, dit and I'm going oomchick, oomchick, oomchick, oomchick — that went on for about two months when I got word that a friend of mine had recommended me to do an audition for a person called Ray Ellington, who was very famous because of the Goon Show. He probably had the most sought after guitar chair in Europe; it would be really something to get. I was very excited and they organised an

audition for me. I went to the audition and they hired a rehearsal room, they put some music in front of me and I COULDN'T READ MUSIC. I'd forgotten to do that, you see. I could play great, but I've forgotten that you're supposed to read music. The one (piece) was an arrangement of "That Old Black Magic," Keetie Smith and Sam Butera. They counted me in and I didn't start, they counted again and I didn't start. The third time they realised I couldn't read. So Ray Ellington said, "Well, OK, what a pity, but seeing that we're here lets just jam." So we filled up the time and we just jammed. He could hear that I could play. So most apologetic, I had to go back to the leggings and the Blue Boar Inn. About two or three weeks later his (Ray Ellington's) piano player had persuaded him to try and get me to memorise this book. It was a book of about 70 pieces. Very intricate little arrangements, something like the George Shearing Quintet, which I then did. The moral there is, right time, right place, right moment, that's how life goes, you know? It was just a wonderful moment in my life and everything came from that, so I did get the job and I stayed for about two years. I learned a tremendous amount, did a lot of TV, a lot of touring around England and a little bit in Europe. I became very well known; I was probably better known in London than I am here. That put me in the ears of Ronnie Scott so he called me and asked if I would play at his club. I went in there and played on Friday and he liked it very much and he designated the band to me. I played the next four years at Ronnie Scott's with some of the greatest names in jazz. A wonderful learning curve for me; I just got better and better, but I also became dissatisfied with what I was doing because it was just Bebop Standards and I was becoming aware of all kinds of other musics:

fusion, Miles Davis, crazy stuff, my friend John McLaughlin. So I wasn't happy anymore and I pulled out of there, came home for two years because I wanted to change the type of music I played and I got involved in playing fusion; you would never say so listening to me now. I was using overdrive pedals, Jimi Hendrix, that whole hard metal thing; for about ten years I did that. Anyway, I came back home for two years and America was the dream. Everything was in America from those days in the movies. America, that was the heaven where the jazz happened. I was about 32 years old now and ready for America. Got on the plane and this time I had R5,000 in my pocket and two children — same wife. So we went there and stayed for two and a half years, trying to get legality, but unfortunately as much as I love them, they didn't love me in return. They didn't want to give me a green card; they said I might be taking work away from their men. So I finished up back here and the last 30 years I've devoted my time to studying more academically than before, being involved in the local scene, playing with who ever I can and here I am.

=====

Barney Rachabane

With me it starts in the township and on the street corners — hanging out at the shops, playing the pennywhistle and, of course, taking a bus into Johannesburg to play on the street corners for some silver collection. I was about 9 or 10 at that time. Of course, I was interested in playing the saxes, but couldn't afford a saxophone at that time. At home when you used to talk about playing music, it was another story. They used to say, "Man, music, you can't play music. Nobody makes a living from playing music." So, I thought to myself, the best way is to just crack the pennywhistle, that's how to make the bucks so I could get into the big horns, whatever horn I could afford. Fortunately, on my street there was somebody who had a clarinet. That clarinet cost about 10 pounds. I was doing a recording with EMI, so I borrowed the money from them and I went back to the people that were selling the clarinet and I got it for 10 pounds. I was very happy to get that clarinet, and then I started practising on the clarinet. But the clarinet wasn't a very popular instrument in the townships; you had to have the sax. I was playing around with the clarinet, but

was not so happy (I wanted to get tight with the musicians). I eventually started giggin' around, and there was this old man who had a band and played wedding gigs and parties in the townships. After the gig he took three rand from each of the musicians for using his sax. The guys didn't have instruments, he was capitalising on that, but it was great because I would say, "You got three rand from me man, can I have the horn for the week?" He said, "OK, but give me another three rand." I gave him another three rand then I know for the whole week I have the sax. Then we would have another gig next week, of course. He could trust me because he knows when the gigs are there, I'll be there and when I need the horn it will be three bucks and that's it. I continued like that for a while and tried to acquire my own sax. I kept borrowing; sometimes we would hit loggerheads and I would be out of the band and then I would try to borrow another sax somewhere. Eventually I joined another band; I can't remember how I got my sax, can't recall. Now and then I would have a saxophone, though I still had the clarinet. Then one day I thought, "Hey, this clarinet man, I want to clean it." I take a bath, I put some water there, I put the clarinet inside! I take a rag and pull it right through that side. Now, I leave it for a while, I go outside so it can soak or something. So I was hanging outside, maybe smoking a cigarette, when I came back. Man, I found the pads floating in the water! Man, what did I do now? How am I going to get out of this now? I tried to put them back. I tried to dry them. I dried them in the sun, they dried up and I tried to put them back. Man, no way! I tried to put some glue on them, but they were bugged. Those pads weren't going to close. Anyway, I continued playing with the guys in the townships: Tony Padiso, Zekes Ngozi, there were other guys; they liked me because they thought I could play the clarinet. So I gigged around with them. Eventually I went to Dorkay House, because there you could meet the guys — Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa, all the big stars. So I started going to Dorkay House after school. Then there was the show King Kong; that was 1959. I got involved there; they booked the pennywhistle band I had, the Kwela Kids. We were booked to play in King Kong. But we had a problem: they wanted us to be there at two o'clock to start rehearsals, but we were all attending school and the school came out at two o'clock; that's the time we should have been here! So we rehearsed there for a week, then the following week, when we came we found Zami Mbaso and his band. He was a great pennywhistler as well. I said, "What's happening here?" And they said, "No man, you guys are late everyday." I said, "No man, school comes out at two o'clock; how can we be here at two o'clock?" So we lost the gig, otherwise we could have gone to London with King Kong. That was not a problem, I continued with the pennywhistle and made some kwela records. While at Dorkay House I was meeting the jazz guys, so I was learning jazz there. Eventually, I joined a group there called the Bombing Idols, but that group really didn't go far. It was a practise group, we really didn't get gigs, we just practised; there wasn't much happening at the time. After that group ... 1963 ... there was the big band, the Castle Lager Big Band with Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana, Mongezi Feza, Bob Tizzard, Ezra's father, Chris (Christopher Columbus) Ngcukana — hey, a very big band. I was around 16; we already had done the jazz festival album. Then I went to Cape Town with the Blue Notes. We stayed for a year and opened a club there called Room at the Top. Initially we owned the club on weekends, with people coming there to buy booze, make tea and listen to the music. Weekdays we just practised there. Our friend Ronnie was paying the rent, because he had a day job working for Old Mutual. He used to pay the rent and we could just practise during the week there and on Friday, Saturday and Sunday night we have a gig. Then on Sunday night we split the money to cover the groceries for the week. Eventually, after a year we went to Joburg to play the '64 jazz festival. When we came there, they said, "Hey man, you've been away too long, you mustn't go." The quartet wasn't having Kippie (Moeketsi) anymore and they said, "Please can you stay?" And I said, "Sure, man." And I joined the quartet. Then we did that album Jazz Festival '64 and then after that I stayed for a while. Then Johnny Mekoamekoe came into the picture; we had this quartet. When Johnny joined us we called the group the Big 5. We played for a while with that group and we got gigs through the Sun Hotels, but that was a problem. We

started working at a 5-star hotel in Durban, the Edward Hotel. In those days you couldn't have a black band playing in a venue like that, man. We got in there and played for two or three weeks; the place was always packed. In the third week the press started talking about it, you know, black people playing in white venues like that, no way! Black people can't play those places. The problem was the white musicians union; they got in there and said, "Man, those guys must be out of that place". We were going to play the Holiday Inn's, the Edward, do the Swaziland Holiday Inn, and move around all the Sun Hotels. They kicked us out of there, so we're out of work. Things were so bad man, later on the group broke up, it was terrible. Then I joined another group called the Soul Giants with Dennis Mpali, Shakes Mgulwa, Mongezi (Feza). We managed to cut one album with that group and then that group also disbanded. You know, you really couldn't keep a band going, because man there's no gigs. Guys had to look for day jobs and things like that, but then I continued freelancing. I thought, no man, it's better just to freelance — do session work, play with whoever I can play with. Now I'm really freelancing a lot, because jazz-wise there isn't much work. I would get gigs with people like Richard Smith, you know, pop stars that would just book the brass guys, then next time, Jonathan Butler. These guys were big stars at the time, they were making big bucks, man. So we were joining those types of things.

=====

Darius Brubeck

Most of you are aware that I come from a musical background. My father is still working as a jazz musician; he's touring all over the world, he's 80 years old (b. 1920). I had two uncles, my father's brothers, who also were musicians. Their mother was a classical piano teacher, so music was pervasive in my environment. Now, when you think of Dave Brubeck, or indeed of all of the famous jazz musicians in that generation, they may seem like people who are just there in the art form permanently. You don't realize that as young people they went through struggles; that they went through a period of learning and a period of getting established in music. I'm just old enough to remember a time when rehearsals were at home, because there was no other place to have them, and that was great for me. I would find a corner of the room and just sit there and watch the magic happening between Dave and Paul Desmond, who we addressed as "Uncle Paul". I had to grow up a little bit before I realized that he wasn't another one of my father's brothers. They sort of looked alike and seemed to like each other. In fact, it took a long time for me to become really aware that everyone just didn't grow up and play an instrument; at least that was what adult males did. They grew up, earned an instrument and then came over to my father's house and found a place near the piano and played. This is not at all a tale of deprivation, but it seemed like years before we lived anywhere permanently. I can remember just going from gig to gig in the back of a car. It was a wonderful big American car called a Kaiser Vagabond with a V8 engine and big enough inside for a drum set, for me and a brother or two and my mother, and sometimes a set of vibes when Cal Tjader was along. I had a place under the vibes which made kind of a trestle table, or I could sleep next to the bass that kind of created a hollow space in the car with drums packed around it. Sometimes Paul went with us. It was fun to have him in the car because he was very witty; he liked to tell stories and make jokes. These are early, early memories; I'm talking early '50s. If you ask me about cities in America, I've lived in most of them though I can never remember for how long. Whether it was for five days or a week or months would depend on what the gigs were. In 1954 Dave was on the cover of Time Magazine and his records started selling so the gigs got better. We had a permanent home and we could afford some luxuries, but the thing I want to emphasize is that it didn't just happen. You don't just

become a musician and it's all taken care of for you by other people. The work that created the phenomenon of "Dave Brubeck" my mother and father did themselves. My mother was known as the best personal manager in the business with only one client — her husband. She was very good, very thorough. They developed the college concert circuit by offering to go and play a sort of free sample for just enough money to cover transportation. At that time the Quartet was Joe Dodge (drums) Ron Crotty (bass) Paul Desmond and Dave. They would go off someplace and play a short gig and say, "This could work on campus; get together a sponsor like a fraternity house or some organization like that and we'll do a big one," and that's how the college jazz scene developed. I do have some personal memories of, as the cliché goes, jazz legends. Miles Davis had an extended gig at the Blackhawk in San Francisco. The family was by then having good times and we had a house in Oakland across the bay; a very nice modern house. It had a flat, fenced asphalt area in the back with a basketball hoop and a tennis court. One day Miles Davis came over to visit my father and though I was very young, I had a sense that this was really an important guy. I made a point of staying home so I could see what they would do and what they might listen to, what they would talk about, thinking I might learn something. Well, this is what they did: they spent about as long as they could be playing one-on-one basketball until they just ran out of breath and then sat down and talked about boxing. Miles was a person of extremes. When he wanted to be fit, he was like really into it; went to the gym and trained when it was not considered a usual thing, especially for jazz musicians. Ralph Gleason (then of the San Francisco Chronicle) showed up at the house. Miles wanted to go back and catch a nap before his gig that night. When he was about to leave Ralph Gleason said, "You know your way to Dave's and I'm right on the way, so if you come over here again, you can just drop by my house." Miles looked him straight in the eye and said, "What for?" So that was Miles, Mr. Cool.