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Courageous And Encouraging: New York Trombonist Clifton Anderson

An interview by Barbara Frenz

Clifton Anderson (*1957) belongs to the leading New York trombonists of today. For many years he has closely worked with Sonny Rollins and can also be heard on recordings by other greats, such as Dizzy Gillespie, McCoy Tyner, Geri Allen, Stevie Wonder and The Mighty Sparrow. As a musician and his own producer he has dedicated himself exclusively to the trombone – which is courageous considering the music market of today. With his mature sound and his rich melodic playing he carries forward J.J. Johnson's legacy and adds a generous dash of Calypso.

BF When you were about seven years old, your mother took you to see the film *The Music Man* from 1962 with Robert Preston as leading part. The trombone choir in this film fascinated you and made you desperately want to play the trombone.
CA Yeah. First, I got attracted to the trombone because it looked like so much fun, you know, all those trombone players marching on the street, the slides going and everything. But I got more serious about it as I started growing older – and then I heard the recording *J.J. Plays Broadway* by J.J. Johnson. Of course I never heard a trombone sound like that.
BF Can you describe that sound?
CA At the time I almost didn't believe it was a trombone. Because it was so smooth, the sound was so rich, and also his articulation was so clean. And then of course I later realized that it wasn't just his sound but that he had really developed the style of playing the trombone in a bebop setting.
BF Shortly after you had seen the film *The Music Man,* your uncle, Sonny Rollins, bought you a trombone. His sister, your mother, had told him about your avid desire.
CA Yes, I was about seven years old. And of course I was ecstatic when I saw the trombone. But I was so little, at seven years old, I was too small to actually play the whole instrument.
BF Did your mother encourage you becoming a jazz musician?
CA No. My mother didn't want me to be a jazz musician. She and Sonny were close, and she knew what Sonny had gone through developing and living as a jazz musician. She tried her best to discourage me at a certain point, when she saw that I was really serious about playing music for a career.
BF When did you start playing jazz music?
CA I must have been maybe sixteen, seventeen. I was going to the LaGuardia High School of Music and Art, a famous school here in New York City.
BF Did they have jazz music on their curriculum?
CA No. To really answer your question – when I graduated from Music and Art and went to Manhattan High School of Music the same thing was going on at that time in that school. There was no jazz studies program. And even Juillard which is a well known school didn't develop a jazz program till the early 2000s.
BF Did you get a chance to develop your own sound on the trombone at school?
CA Yeah. And that really gave me an edge after I left the school in terms of developing technique and sound in jazz circles. A lot of what you play on that training, for playing symphonic music in particular, is focused on breathing and on sound or projection. The jazz circles were more focused on theory and technique on the trombone.

BF So, you learned playing jazz music the same way like the veteran musicians did – outside of school.
CA Well, when I was maybe in my senior year in Music and Art I started going out. Reggie Workman had a program out in Brooklyn at a place called The Muse, where he would teach jazz classes. Sam Rivers had a spot down on the East Side called Studio Rivbea. And he would have a big band down there also.
BF Did you play in their bands?
CA Yeah. A little bit later Barry Harris had his Jazz Cultural Centre on 8th Avenue. That was about as close to formal jazz training as you could get anywhere in the world. I mean authentically. Many of the greatest jazz musicians in the world would come through there – e. g. Charlie Rouse, Clifford Jordan, sometimes Freddie Hubbard, Tommy Flanagan, Eddie Jefferson, etc.
BF In 1977 Slide Hampton was looking for the best up-and-coming trombonists in New York for his trombone choir project *World Of Trombones* and hired you among others.
CA Yeah. I had been to Manhattan School for about three years already and I had taken all kinds of ensemble courses, brass courses – but nothing like this. This was a unique thing – Slide's arranging. His idea was to have about eight trombones, he in the front and then the rhythm section. The writing was fantastic, it was also extremely challenging. He was writing trombone lines like saxophone lines.
BF Speaking of the saxophone, let's talk about your uncle, Sonny Rollins. What was your first or at least an early experience with him?
CA I have a very vague memory of that, but my mother had told me that she remembered this when this happened. I must have been about six years old. We were living on the 163rd Street in the Bronx. This one day I remember somebody knocking on the door. I answered the door and saw this big guy standing there and he had the Mowhawk haircut. He looked like an Indian. And he scared me. So I went running to my mother and I said, *There is an Indian at the door!* And she said, *What are you talking about, this is your uncle!*
BF In the late Seventies you started taking part in rehearsals with Sonny Rollins's groups. In 1983 he finally called you to come to play with him. What did you learn from him? How did he teach you?
CA He definitely hipped me to different approaches to playing this music that I hadn't been exposed to before. Sometimes he could be vague too, not always giving a definitive answer to a question and not always giving me music to songs he would play. So, it was very hard for me at first to figure out how to fit into his band. Towards the end of my first year in his band I thought I was beginning to find my way. And then one early morning I got a phone call, I was half groggy, and I hear his voice, *Clifton, what's going on*? And I said, *Oh Sonny!* And he said, *Look man, this is not happening right now, you know, I'm having some trouble with my mouth, and we're not really playing cohesively together, so I'll have to let you go.* I realized, *Oh I just got fired.* So, I didn't work with him for a whole year. He called me back in 1985 – and this answers to your question – and hired me to go to Japan. We came back from that tour and he had some spot dates in the States here. One night we were getting ready to go out on the stage and he comes into the dressing room and he didn't say anything to me, but he handed me a piece of paper. And on this piece of paper he wrote a little note, and it said, *Clifton, I don't want you to approach playing with me like playing with any other quintet or group that you are working with. I want everything we do to be intuitive*. … It wasn't till almost maybe five or six months later that I was talking to Al Foster. We were just talking about music and playing. He said to me, *Did you ever see that Art Blakey video, where Art Blakey is in Japan, with The Messengers* [1961 – with Bobby Timmons, Wayne Shorter, Lee

Morgan, and Jymie Merritt]. *Man, check this out.* So I watched this video. They were set up on the stage in a way that none of them were facing the other one. They started playing this arrangement which was rhythmically intricate. They had to be like right on top of it and none of them were looking at each other. And I realized, *That's what Sonny is talking about*. So, I started to focus on that. A different type of lesson, how to really kind of become one with everybody who's on the stage and Sonny in particular. To know, to be comfortable with where he was going, so I could anticipate what he wanted to do. So, from that point on I started to develop that, and that was when the music started to come together – I mean my contribution started to improve.

BF In your music the Calypso is a very much alive element, which I guess is closely connected with the cultural legacy of your mother's and father's families – both stem from the Carribean, and both of your parents were musicians also.

CA Yes. I had a natural kind of affinity to be able to play it. It's rhythmic, a certain kind of feeling, it's not something that you write down on a paper and can execute that way. With Calypso, like with most cultural musics, you have to be able to identify with. So, if you are in that culture, it's easy to identify. I played on nearly every Calypso recording between 1974 and 1980 probably – the Mighty Sparrow was just one.

BF Let me get back to the trombone once again – from a different angle: In a 2010 interview you said, *The industry is kind of biased and uneducated about the history and present potential of the trombone as a lead instrument. We can start to change this and get back on track with the trombone*. Do you see any change already?

CA I don't think that the mentality has changed that much in the industry towards the trombone. Somebody like Trombone Shorty – a talented musician and entertainer – will come along, but Trombone Shorty is not focused primarily on playing the trombone, I mean he sings and he plays the trumpet, and he does all these other things. What we need is more attention from the industry that allows more trombonists greater exposure. People already relate to the trombone. Given a higher profile the industry can place trombonists on equal footing with other instruments in the marketplace.

BF With your latest album *And So We Carry On*, which you released as your own producer, you have proven that the trombone can be a really successful lead instrument. You got a lot of critical acclaim for that album. Can you explain its title – which collective subject is speaking here?

CA It's talking basically about the human experience – as human beings. I had a conversation with Sonny and we were talking about the human condition in terms of human beings being able to evolve if we are indeed capable of evolving. You know, we continue to make war, we continue to engage in racism. So, that is in part what is in that title. But the record was initially a statement to help. It was intended – when people listen to it – to give them a sense of something that is more powerful than all those things and that is always here. We are, as human beings and individuals, in this universe, in this infinite existence, and are able to understand that there's something that keeps us moving, that keeps us going, no matter how bad the crisis is. That's what I want the music to be reflective of.

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