

Steve Swell

Excerpt from Interview by Ken Weiss

SS: I spent a lot of my early years working hard to improve my technical skills [on trombone], working out of standard books such as *Arbans* and *Rochut*, practicing for six hour sessions, four to five days a week for many years just so that I could have the skills to express myself. The person who really opened my ears beyond learning all the scales and just playing songs was Roswell Rudd. I started playing trombone when I was ten and I heard him when I was fifteen. It took five years of playing to hear someone who really inspired me. It was at that point that I really fell in love with the instrument.

JI: For those not familiar with the raucous Roswell how would you describe what it was about his playing that inspired you?

SS: It was the depth of his expression, his fearlessness. He was just out there playing and you could just tell that he was feeling it, there was a connection between him and that instrument and his sound. It was a very immediate response for me; it didn't take more than one listen for me to say 'wow, that's it.'

JI: Had you heard J.J. Johnson before him?

SS: Absolutely, I heard J.J., Jack Teagarden and Tommy Dorsey. Dorsey was the first trombone player I heard thanks to my father and that's actually a funny story. In 1964, The Beatles made their first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and a lot of people don't remember this but The Beatles were a huge threat to our society at the time and my father, being one of those people who were afraid of The Beatles, took me into his room when The Beatles came on and played some Tommy Dorsey records for me hoping that I would not be influenced by the rock group. That and many other things which I ended up doing anyway. Tommy Dorsey didn't stop me.

JI: Sounds like a sheltered childhood. How was life in New Jersey?

SS: One of my first jobs was selling pretzels and jelly apples at age 15 at a department store in Union, New Jersey with my best friend Richie. Every night our boss would come by at closing time to pick up the money. He was an older Italian guy named Sal. After 6 months of working there, a much younger guy named Tony started coming to pick up the money with another guy in tow who always wore a 3-piece suit and never said a word. I asked Tony what happened to Sal and he said Sal had gone on a vacation and wasn't coming back. I started getting a bad feeling here and didn't care for Tony's "silent" partner who was always eyeing me up and down. One night Tony came by as usual to pick up his money and his friend suddenly said to me, "how would you like to move up in our organization?" I was completely stunned because as I said, this guy had

never said a word to me before that. I asked him what I would have to do and he said I could make a lot more money if I would sign some checks for him every now and then. It would be someone else's name, not mine. Well, I was a pretty straight 15 year old, didn't drink or smoke but knew when something was not exactly kosher so I told him that I needed a night to think about it. The next day I didn't show up for work and never went back to that job. Richie had to tell Tony and his friend that I had moved to another town in another state.

JI: How did your early musical career advance?

SS: I moved to NYC in 1974 when I was 19. Back then you could answer ads in the *Village Voice* and get gigs in Salsa and R & B bands and that's exactly what I did. I found decent gigs that way. Today you don't find ads looking for trombone players there.

JI: How did you start out playing for a living?

SS: Around 1977 I started to go on the road a lot, mostly with Broadway shows in what they call bus and truck tours. I did *The Wiz*, *Ain't Misbehavin* and *Chicago*. I would be on the road for 3 months at a time sometimes. It got very tiresome playing the same music every night but the money was good and it was a great way to see the country which I had never done before.

JI: Why did you give up Broadway?

SS: It was actually due to the influence of Ken McIntyre. I was doing Broadway and from about 1979 to 1984 I played in the house band at the Roseland Ballroom in New York which was a famous dance hall that had its heyday in the '40s and '50s. Ken really convinced me that if I was really going to play improv jazz or creative music then I really needed to focus on that.

JI: You had a long relationship with the late Makanda Ken McIntyre who never got the recognition that he deserved.

SS: I played with him for many years. My first gig with him was at Carnegie Hall. That was a terrific band and experience. Ken's popularity height came in the '60s when he played with Cecil Taylor on *Unit Structures* and he made some really fantastic Verve albums that were just re-released when he passed away recently. He said to me one time that he thought his fans hadn't been born yet. That was a very forward way of thinking.

JI: You've played with such an impressive group of musicians including Cecil Taylor, Anthony Braxton, Tim Berne, Joey Baron and the list goes on and on, what can you say about playing with such great artists?



SS: First of all the music is great, I enjoy doing it and at the same time you're also learning something. You're learning how to interpret somebody's music, how to make it your own but at the same time, when you are playing a master's music, such as Cecil Taylor, you're not just playing and enjoying the moment, you're also learning as well. You're learning about pacing, how to present your own music, how to be a good leader. He kind of directs us but at the same time he sort of undirects us. He wants us to find our own way and own voice.

JI: How do you explain what you do on the stage to someone who is not in touch with free music?

SS: I think music is about your relationship with sound and how you deal with sound as a listener and being a listener means to turn off the thinking part of your brain and to let the emotional part of yourself take over. Let your ears be the conduit to what is happening and to what the feelings are that you're experiencing and to try to understand what those feelings are. If they are negative feelings, try to figure out why you feel that way about the music.

JI: What advice do you have for the young musicians?

SS: Try to balance your time between trying to get gigs on the computer and practicing. Also, a big problem that is happening these days is that people aren't asking to get paid for gigs and a lot of people are going on tour, doing all door gigs and it's hurting other musicians who are trying to make a living. That's got to stop. If you don't get paid what you deserve to after all the work you've put in then you don't respect yourself or anyone else. ♪

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"The integrity of men is to be measured by their conduct, not by their professions." - Junius