

## **Rick Braun**

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Interviewed by: Bonnie Schendell

Talented artist, record label executive, producer, cruise host, and family man. Rick Braun is one of the busiest guys out there. With a new CD hitting the streets and a cruise about to sail the seas, I was surprised that he had time to chat. Rick took the time to let us all know how things are going and what's coming up next.

**SmoothViews (SV):** *Let's start by talking about the new label, ARTizen. You and Richard Elliot have now joined the ranks of other artists starting a record label. Why did you do this instead of just hooking up with another label?*

**Rick Braun (RB):** Well, you know, I've been on some of the best labels available; the best labels known to man...Warner Bros. [and] Atlantic, to name two of them, and before that on an independent, Mesa/Blue Moon. I have seen very good situations just crumble to the ground, over and over. And I kind of hit a realization that if I want to do this, it is a better situation for me to have control over where the product is going to land ultimately. There is no security in this business. It is a very insecure business. Of course every business is an insecure business now. I was in a situation where I could take the money and sign with another label or I could kind of put my money where my horn is and start making my own records on my own label. Richard [Elliot] and I kind of hit that same point together and I think that really solidified it. When he decided not to resign with GRP and I realized we had two key artists available at the same time, and two entrepreneurial-thinking artists, it was a perfect scenario to start this thing up.

**SV:** *Richard's CD, **Metro Blue**, was the first release, and now you have **Yours Truly** about to hit the streets. Were you at all nervous about releasing your own CD on your own label?*

**RB:** I'm anxious. This is the most anxious time for me, with having finished the CD. My work is done. And now, even though it is my label, I have turned it over to the marketing division of our label, who is Randall Kennedy, who worked for years with Warner Bros. Records and is very good at marketing. Having turned it over to him, I realized that it is still out of my hands, even though it's my label. I can get out there and do the promotional events, but it's a nerve-wracking time between when the CD is finished, delivered and manufactured, and waiting to see how it's going to be received when it hits the streets.

**SV:** *Let's talk about that new CD, **Yours Truly**. It's all covers, but songs not heard as covers before. How did you select these tunes?*

**RB:** There is a story in the notes of the CD that sort of goes down the musical road map of where these come from. They're all songs that are like key stops along my musical journey. There are songs that kind of mark different events. I mean "What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life" gives me a very vivid memory of hearing that on a very hot summer night when I was about 13 with a girl that I was madly in love with.

**SV:** *And I would have thought that it was something played perhaps at your wedding!*

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**RB:** No. In fact, I don't think I have ever played that song live. With all of the gigs I have played, I can never remember actually performing that song. In all of the weddings I played before I had a solo career; all of the jazz gigs I have played; I don't believe I have ever performed that song live. But I think that'll change!!! If you go down the list of songs, the first single, "Shining Star," was playing on the radio nonstop during the drive I took from Rochester, NY to Los Angeles in 1977, when I moved out here. "Walk on the Wild Side" was a song that made a huge impression on me when I was a kid learning trumpet in Allentown, PA. Not only were the lyrics ridiculously wacky, but the sound of the track with the two basses simultaneously jamming and the jazz-like rapping of Lou Reed...not to mention the chorus of vocals "and the colored girls sang do do do do do"...it's just an amazing and unforgettable song for me.

**SV:** *"Love's Theme" from the Love Unlimited Orchestra really took me back.*

**RB:** And that makes everybody who listens to that song start to smile. Even if you don't have a specific memory with that song, it brings back a specific feeling. And that's the thing with these songs; they all bring back for me really strong feelings. "Groove is in the Heart" is a song I remember hearing when I had finished Rod Stewart's tour and I had managed to scrape enough money together to buy a house. I was sitting there in my unfurnished house, because I had no money to furnish it and musicians are not big into furniture anyway when they are single guys! And that goofy chorus of "I'll never dance with another" was echoing off of the walls of my empty house, and I was so happy. And the funny thing was that Herbie Hancock had a hand in writing that song, which I had no idea about before covering it.

I think one of the things also is that I felt very comfortable doing this. You know, I wasn't trying to impress anyone, just playing good songs and enjoying it as much as I hope anyone listening to it will, too. I am just trying to do the songs justice. The production of the CD is very adult and not over-produced. Very organic sounding, very clean.

**SV:** *There are numerous artists doing CDs of covers. What do you feel is the attraction to cover songs these days?*

**RB:** Familiarity is a big thing. For example, if I go out on stage and say "Here's a new song from my brand new CD," and it's an original, even if it's recognizable and destined to be number one single at smooth jazz, it would not get the reception of a song that is already recognizable to an audience. And that's the thing when you're writing original music. First of all, you have to gain acceptance...the song has to be recognized as something that has staying power; something that has some value to it. And that whole hurdle is taken away when you are recording great songs. I think people just like to hear familiar songs. We are going through some really rough times right now economically, politically. The country is divided, there is stuff happening weather-wise that's just ridiculous, earthquakes, wars...it just seems to all have elevated to another level, and I think that people, myself included, want to hear some comfort food! I just want to record some of my favorite songs and have it be a thank you to my fans and maybe they will find the same comfort that I found in recording these.

**SV:** *So, you have an All-Star cruise coming up with one heck of a line-up. How is that going?*

**RB:** It's going! I just hope we will be over the hurricanes.

**SV:** *What are you most looking forward to on the cruise?*

**RB:** Getting out there on the ocean with my wife! (laughs) The kids are staying home and we are going to have ourselves a little honeymoon action! Looking forward to having some romantic time. And I know there are going to be a whole lot of fans out there who I am going to have to share time with, and I don't mind that because there will always be time left for us. I'm just hoping that it is smooth sailing. There are a couple of fun things we're going to do with the fan club, and I am looking forward to seeing everybody, and playing some music with some new people. It's going to be fun. I'm hoping we can have some off-the-cuff jam sessions on the ship, and hoping that people can just hang out with us.

**SV:** *How hard was it to get the artists to sign on?*

**RB:** It wasn't hard, but it wasn't my job to negotiate their salaries or anything! All I did was make some suggestions about who should be on the cruise and the rest of it was up to the organizers.

**SV:** *Do you see the cruises as the "festival" of the future?*

**RB:** I think the big thing about our audience is that people want to have a nice lifestyle experience associated with their cash! If people are going to spend their money to come out and see their favorite artists, they want to do it in a nice environment. And I think this is an environment that people will remember for the rest of their lives. The fun thing for me, as I am running into people across the country, people are really looking at this as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. If not once-in-a-lifetime, but an experience that will be a memorable one that they will never, ever forget. So, it's exciting for me to be a big part of that. I have to remember that people are really excited about this event and I think that the fact that it is out there on the water with the artists hanging out there with their friends and families...it's just an opportunity to hang out with these guys and something you don't get to do at a regular show.

**SV:** *There seems to be a trend these days of "super shows," as opposed to solo artist shows. I know it gives audiences more bang for their buck, but what about the one-on-one interaction there used to be? Are they a thing of the past?*

**RB:** It's a matter of, well...I can bullshit you or I can be pragmatic! (laughs) Here's the bullshit...Oh, it's so much fun to go out with other artists and we love to do that. Well, that's not total bull, but the practicality of it is that people are not coming out for solo shows anymore. Boney James had to cancel several shows in places where we played as a package. If someone like Boney has to do that, then I truly think the days of going out as a solo artist are numbered, if not over. Yes, it's a sad thing because people don't get to see an artist totally...I mean, I have always had a good time having the stage to myself and having an hour and a half just doing what I like to do.

**SV:** *Do you feel the same intimacy with the crowd when you are part of a group as opposed to a solo show?*

**RB:** Well, in the right bunch of people it's a good tradeoff. For instance, the Jazz Attack tour was a really great tour, and it had a great mix of people and we may just rerun it

next year if we can overcome some obstacles. We might just rekindle that. We had great chemistry and everybody has new CDs out, and it would be a good team to keep together. But it is a sign of the times. I don't mind it because being a trumpet player it's hard to play for that long anyway...physically. It's a physical instrument, as time goes on it makes sense. There's just an economics to it that the promoters and agents...they love it because it's an easier sell. It's a pretty much guaranteed money maker, whereas if they are booking a single artist, it's a risk. There are opportunities to go out as a single artist, and those are in what we call protected events, like jazz festivals. But to go out on a routed tour on my own...there's only a handful that can do it. I'm not saying that I'm not ever going to do it again. It could happen, but the likelihood of it happening is slim.

**SV:** *So, after the cruise, you are heading out again with Peter White and Mindi Abair for the Christmas tour. Any surprises for this year? Will you again be playing the orange and dancing with blow-up snowmen?!!*

**RB:** I won't be wearing any underwear!!! (both laugh) No, only kidding!!!!

**SV:** *But you will be wearing leather pants, right?!*

**RB:** Not sure. I haven't broken those out for a while! I need some new ones. No, I am really looking forward to the Christmas tour. Mindi and Peter are really great people and we have a good time and it's a really fun show. And it's like comfort food because Christmas is a great time. You get to play the same material over and over because that's what people want to hear. There's only so many Christmas songs, and there's only so many ways you can do them. People just want to hear those songs. We'll throw in a few songs from the new CD, but it's good fun.

**SV:** *You always seem so happy on stage. How do you stay "up" night after night?*

**RB:** You know, playing music is the icing on the cake. We're grumpy as hell when we're traveling. You don't want to run in to us at the airport! But when we get to the gig, we're happy because we get to play music! (laughs)

**SV:** *So what's next for Rick Braun? Are you looking for new artists on your label?*

**RB:** We are talking to a few people. There are a few things that we're talking about. There are a couple of projects that we're very excited about, but are not really at liberty to talk about yet because it'll jinx them and I have to wait until the signatures are on the line. And then I'll talk to you a LOT about it!!

**SV:** *Are you working on new material for the next CD?*

**RB:** Well, one thing that we're hoping to do as the next ARTizen project is a duet record with me and Richard. We're thinking about calling it "Back to Basics" or something like that, or "Roots." We want to pull from the influence we both have from our past as sidemen, for me with the group War, and for Richard, he spent years with Tower of Power. So, maybe we would pull a couple of songs from that repertoire, and then also do a whole bunch of originals. It won't be a covers CD! That's one thing that we're hoping to bring out in the near future. Some of the other things we are hoping to do with the label are some educational things. One thing is I want to offer a method course with each release we do where people who are learning an instrument can come to the website, order a CD minus the instrument they're learning. Like I would do some mixing

minus that instrument and then we would send out sheet music and chords so that they can play along with the melody. And we would maybe send some instructional things with it, like maybe a DVD or some sort of a course they could buy. I think that would be a really neat thing. I know the legal department is going to have a fit, but we'll work it out.

**SV:** *Are there any final thoughts? Anything else you want people to know? I've heard that you've been camping a lot lately!*

**RB:** Oh, no...Oh my gosh! I have to tell you this story. I went camping, because I am always looking for peace and quiet. What I figured out was that as long as I have *my* head on *my* shoulders, I'll never find it! I went camping to this beautiful place called Red Rock Canyon, not the big Red Rock, but just north of Mojave. I went up there and it was absolutely dead quiet and peaceful as can be. I lit a campfire and camped right below these beautiful limestone sculpted canyons, and the fire was lighting up the canyon. I was sitting there and these two huge, snow white owls flew right over my head in absolute silence. I was just sitting there. Being a guy, I made a whole can of baked beans!!! It's so quiet in the desert at night that you can hear anything. Ridiculously quiet. So finally I lay down thinking finally I can get that sleep that I've been dreaming about. About two hours into sleeping, I *boing* awake and, okay, I am having a dream...a vivid Technicolor dream, as real as you can dream, about an alien spaceship cutting the Earth in half with a laser beam right in front of my feet! I looked down and realized this is the end of the world. And that's when I was waking up! And I am laying there in this dead quiet, which has now turned into this...wait a minute, isn't this the kind of place where aliens actually abduct people?!! (both laughing) I am laying there...if I hadn't had a windshield cover on, I would have driven out of there at like 70 miles an hour, but I was too scared to go outside of the RV!!!! So I just laid there waiting to be abducted!

**SV:** *So, did you ever get back to sleep or were you awake the whole night?*

**RB:** I eventually got back to sleep after about an hour and a half, but when you are camping, the sun comes up and wakes you at the crack of dawn. That was my peace and quiet, and when I realized that I am really not an outdoorsman at heart! I am too weird! And even with the RV...aliens don't care. They'll pick the whole RV up! The whole family has gone camping, but I'll take them up there with me the next time, so I'm not alone!!! If we get abducted, we're all together! If we disappear from the face of the Earth, just look for the RV tracks up there!

**SV:** *Well, thank you, Rick, for taking the time to talk, for the laughs tonight, and for all the time you spend with everyone at shows. It is so appreciated.*

**RB:** Thank you, Bonnie. I appreciate all of you, too.

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