

A Conversation with Randy Halberstadt

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Pianist, arranger, composer, and educator Randy Halberstadt is known equally for his skill at the piano as for his close association with singers. He is a first-call accompanist for most local jazz vocalists, and works or has worked with Greta Matassa, Gail Pettis, Ernestine Anderson, Jay Clayton, Beth Winter, Dee Daniels, and Janis Mann. His ability to blend in and support vocalists, adapting to their various styles and sounds, is impressive – and one of the main reasons why Halberstadt is so popular with them.

“Randy creates a very supportive bed for us to sing in,” says Matassa. “He listens to a particular type of phrasing that we have – because each of us is different – and complements it with a particular kind of voicing. I think that when Randy works with a singer that listens to him, there’s a lot more that can happen. If you’re a singer who’s working with Randy, if you’re not listening to him, then you’re missing an awful lot of what can really happen in a conversation.”

That said, accompanist is only one role Halberstadt fills. He regularly leads his own group, and has recorded three albums as leader: *Inner Voice* (Pony Boy, 1991), *Clockwork* (Pony Boy, 1996), and *Parallel Tracks* (Origin Records, 2004), which won the 2004 Golden Ear Award for Northwest Recording of the Year. Halberstadt is also a music educator: he’s a professor at Cornish College of the Arts, teaches private students, and is the author of *Metaphors for the Musician: Perspectives from a Jazz Pianist* (published by Sher Music), a very practical and down-to-earth instruction book that ranges from improvisation, theory, and even career advice for practicing musicians.

Halberstadt, 52, will perform with his quintet (bassist Jeff Johnson, drummer Gary Hobbs, trumpeter Thomas Marriott, and saxophonist Mark Taylor) on November 10 at the Seattle Art Museum as part of Earshot’s Art of Jazz series. I met with Halberstadt at his home in West Seattle to discuss his early career starting



PHOTO BY DANIEL SHEEHAN

Randy Halberstadt. The Randy Halberstadt Quintet performs on November 10, 5:30pm at the Seattle Art Museum as part of the ongoing Art of Jazz Series. Admission free with museum entry.

out on the Seattle jazz scene in the 1970s, the close association he has with singers, and his role as a music educator.

EARSHOT JAZZ: It’s my understanding you were raised in Texas. Tell me how you arrived in Seattle and became interested in performing music.

RANDY HALBERSTADT: My first instrument was the trombone. That’s about all they had down there in Odessa, Texas: football, marching bands, not much jazz. My intent in coming to Seattle was to be an oceanographer. The University of Washington had a great department. But it didn’t work out. Once I rolled up my sleeves and got into it, I found out it wasn’t for me. I just kind of slogged around and tried different things for a couple years, like most college kids do. One day a dorm buddy took me to a piano and played a song he had written, and I was hooked. The piano became a composing machine for me. I had no interest in actually becoming a pianist. It was all about the song. For a year or two, when I went to the piano it was just to work on my own songs. Eventually, I decided to apply for the music department

with the intent of being a composer. The problem was, I had to audition on an instrument, and the only thing I knew was the trombone. In the music department, I kind of lost focus because I didn’t really want to be a trombonist. It took until graduation before I realized that. At that point, I was just getting good enough on piano that I could handle a few gigs.

EARSHOT: This was in the mid- to late-1970s. What was the jazz environment like in Seattle at the time?

HALBERSTADT: Well, there were a number of very good musicians and some clubs like the Pioneer Banquet, Parnell’s, the first Jazz Alley, and a number of hole-in-the-wall clubs for the local musicians, just as there are today. But I was coming in at an entry level. I decided to try to make something happen, rather than sit back and wait for the phone to ring. My first move was to sit down with my record collection, transcribe a bunch of stuff, and put a book together. I picked the tunes I wanted to play, with no thought to what was marketable. Then I asked around, ‘Who are the good players?’ That led me to Danny O’Brien on bass

and Teo Sutton on drums. I went to a place that hadn't had music before, and I scored us a four-night-a-week gig for about six weeks. It was good money. I was just stunned. It may still be the best gig I ever had [*laughing*]. That got my foot in the door. If one of the guys couldn't make it to a gig, I would hire someone else, so in this way I started networking. That led to playing on other peoples' gigs. There were certain people on the scene back then who are still on the scene today. Floyd Standifer, of course. I remember I had a little ad at the time, and I went to Floyd and sat with him on the break. I showed him my ad: 'Band forming. Need tenor sax, trumpet, bass, and drums.' He just laughed and said, 'Well, sonny, you're looking for a whole *band*. You got nothing!' It was true.

EARSHOT: Is it fair to say you have a close association with singers?

HALBERSTADT: It's totally fair. Part of that is just what the market bears. Singers are not sidemen, typically. If they're going to work, they have to get off their butts and get the gigs. So that's what most of the calls are that come in. And I seem to have figured out some good ways of working with singers. I really enjoy doing it.

EARSHOT: Does working with singers bring out something in your playing

that is a little different than working with other musicians?

HALBERSTADT: For the most part, it's not different from working with a horn player. But lyrics are one difference – listening to lyrics and trying to create an accompaniment that complements or enhances the message of the tune. I really enjoy creating a very wide-open space for a singer to work in. But I also really enjoy the balance between working with singers and with instrumentalists. I like working with Hadley Caliman. I did a show last night with Susan Pascal, Chuck Deardorf, and John Bishop. I absolutely adore working in that band. I also recorded with Clarence Acox on a couple albums. They're just different, and I enjoy that. But you're right. I seem to have gained a reputation as [*pause*] I hate the word 'accompanist,' because it sounds subservient. It doesn't matter who you are making music with, all of you should have your ears open and be listening to each other. We're all musicians. But what I like for myself is a balance between being a sideman and doing my own thing. If I just did my own thing, I don't think I would grow. I know there are some great players out there who have chosen not to be sidemen. Ultimately, it's about the music that is most important to you. For me, I wouldn't be comfortable either just doing sideman gigs or just leading my own group. When I work with a variety

of players, I bring my composing and arranging mentalities to that, and I learn from their contributions.

EARSHOT: Let's talk about your book. I was very impressed by how you write in such a frank and approachable way. Right up front, in the chapter 'Crooked Road,' you make it clear that you struggled with many of the hurdles in learning jazz, and that you had to change directions many times before you found the way that worked for you.

HALBERSTADT: A lot of people have mentioned that chapter. I originally had it in the back of the book, as an 'about the author' type of thing. My editor said, 'You've got to move that up to the front.' I'm very glad that I did that. It does tend to draw people in. I get e-mails from all over the world, and most are complementary. One of the first e-mails I received was from a woman in San Francisco who just broke into tears while reading it. She said it released a lot of her fears. I'm happy to provide that service. It's important for students to know that people they respect aren't monoliths. We're not untouchable. We didn't come out of the womb knowing how to do this. I know that's not true of me.

For more information about Halberstadt, visit randyhalberstadt.com.



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