

Hugo Rasmussen

by Laurence Donohue-Greene



'60s



'10s

Though his name isn't as recognizable as it should be Stateside, septuagenarian bassist Hugo Rasmussen, revered as a Danish musical institution, has arguably played with more American jazz greats than anyone else alive. And he's done so mostly in Copenhagen, having come to the US no more than a dozen times from his recollection, mostly as part of guitarist Pierre Dørge's New Jungle Orchestra.

Rasmussen was born Mar. 22nd 1941 in Bagsværd, a then-suburb of Copenhagen now part of the Danish capital. He recently celebrated his 70th birthday with a night-long jam session at Copenhagen's Huset with over a hundred guests, many close friends.

Prolific to be sure, since becoming a professional musician at age 18 he's appeared on over 800 recordings, which hardly speaks to the number of musicians he's worked with live. Saxophonist and countryman John Tchicai once asked him to make a list of everyone with whom he's played. "There were hundreds of names. It was a lot of fun to put together!" Starting with A, Rasmussen went through the entire alphabet by last name - "I can just look through my jazz dictionary and more names just pop up!" Joe Albany, Harry Beckett, Al Cohn, Kenny Drew, Roy Eldridge, Art Farmer, Dexter Gordon, Coleman Hawkins, Abdullah Ibrahim, Duke Jordan, Lee Konitz, Mel Lewis, Tete Montoliu and Oliver Nelson took him halfway through the alphabet. He has very few regrets of not having the chance to play with some of his heroes, though he points out, "I never played with Lester Young or Louis Armstrong. [It] would have been fun to be beside them, but I've played with so many others. And folks say, 'You must be very happy to have played with all those you have!', which is true." Rasmussen's all-time favorites are Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Lester Young, whom he credits as "the people who helped make this music."

Rasmussen, originally a trained blacksmith before deciding to become a full-time musician, remembered when he was a teenager making the conscious choice between the Bill Haley/Elvis Presley camp or Trad jazz from England, soon choosing the latter. Starting on banjo, after a year he turned his focus to the bass. He

spent countless hours studying bassist Bob Haggart's 1941 bass method book.

"I'm totally self-taught. I learned from that book. I taught myself how to read music." Ironically he never had the education like the one he now gives his students (he taught at the Rhythmic Music Conservatory in Copenhagen from its opening in the mid '80s up until a switch several years ago to private students). "I do have my career and that's why I could and can teach," he explains. "I don't think you can teach anybody to play; you can show them how to try. You can only teach yourself how to play and that's by practice and playing - by yourself and with others."

He expressed a particular fondness for the 'walking' tradition of jazz bass playing, as opposed to late Danish bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen (five years Rasmussen's junior), a more familiar name to American jazz audiences. "We were colleagues," said Rasmussen. "I usually made all the gigs he couldn't make... I was never competition; I gave up right away because he was such a fantastic player."

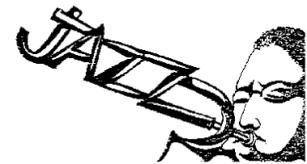
Their musical relationship is akin to the dual trumpet styles of Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie, Rasmussen more of a melodic master than a technical virtuoso like his counterpart. "Niels-Henning changed it. He was a world-class master. Nobody plays like him, still!" Asked how he describes his own playing, Rasmussen sentimentally says, "I'm old school. I'm old fashioned." And even though he excels in freer jazz context - frequently with Danish drummer Kresten Osgood - Rasmussen's lyrical approach is his greatest strength.

Regarding future recording projects, Rasmussen doesn't have any immediate plans as leader or sideman, though he still maintains a busy schedule as a Copenhagen first-call bassist. Not needing to travel has turned out to be beneficial since Rasmussen has had some health problems, including with his heart (he now has a pacemaker and seems to be fine). He was also diagnosed with prostate cancer almost five years ago but he is playing every day now, taking good care of himself with a diet that includes "lots of ginger, garlic, chiles, cauliflower - and not much meat and cheese!"

There's a book in the works about the bassist, a compilation of interviews in Danish featuring 30+ musical colleagues (mostly Danish) including Dørge, saxophonist Jesper Thilo and drummer Alex Riel. With his connection to so many American jazz artists, most of whom have since passed on, Rasmussen is a living link for much of America's past in jazz, so hopefully there will be an English translation - if any stateside publishers are reading. ❖

Recommended Listening:

- Horace Parlan - *Arrival* (SteepleChase, 1973)
- Ralph Sutton - *In Copenhagen* (Storyville, 1977)
- Hugo Rasmussen - *Sweets to the Sweet* (RCA-Victor, c. late '70s)
- Teddy Wilson - *In Copenhagen* (Storyville, 1979)
- Pierre Dørge & The New Jungle Orchestra - *Even the Moon is Dancing* (SteepleChase, 1985)
- Pierre Dørge & The New Jungle Orchestra - *Live at Birdland* (Stunt, 1999)



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LEST WE FORGET

Kai Winding (1922-83)

by Donald Elfman

"For many years, within the jazz idiom, the trombone was looked upon as an instrument with limitations... With the advent of bebop, when the lines became more technical and required more ability, then guys like myself, JJ and many others came along and changed the whole concept of technique on the instrument." - Kai Winding

Many a jazz lover's first exposure to trombonist Kai Winding - mine included - was hearing the theme from the movie *Mondo Cane*, entitled "More", in 1963. This was a Top Ten single and indicative of Winding's work in the '60s, when he mixed his jazz trombone with music from the pop and country worlds. But in the '40s-50s, Winding was an influential musician, around at the birth of bebop, a significant big band player and,

from 1954-56, in a powerful partnership with fellow trombonist JJ Johnson.

Kai Chresten Winding was born in Aarhus, Denmark on May 18th, 1922. His family moved to the United States in 1934. After a stint in the Coast Guard during World War II, the trombonist moved to New York and played with Benny Goodman before joining the band of Stan Kenton. Winding's debut as a solo bandleader was with his Krazy Kats group for the Verve label in 1946. In the late '40s, Winding collaborated with Tadd Dameron and Charlie Ventura before getting the opportunity to appear on Miles Davis' landmark *Birth of the Cool*.

Winding's most significant contribution to modern jazz recordings came in the pairings with Johnson. The pair did recordings for many labels, including Savoy, Bethlehem, Debut, Prestige, Columbia and Impulse, and played a little of everything - pop tunes, dance music, show music and, of course, straight jazz and bebop. In 1960, they released *The Great Kai and J.J.*, an

album that featured pianist Bill Evans.

The success of these recordings inspired a number of trombone albums and, in fact, the two reunited in 1964 for another Impulse album, this time with legendary bop guitarist Billy Bauer. Winding continued to record in the '60s and worked (and recorded for Verve under Creed Taylor) with a septet that included Carl Fontana, Wayne Andre and Dick Lieb on trombones. A unique setting for Winding was with the short-lived Giants of Jazz with Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk and Art Blakey.

Winding left for Spain in 1977 and lived there in semi-retirement, performing at an occasional festival. He died in Yonkers, NY on May 6th, 1983. A number of the Kai and JJ recordings are available on CD and even his 'commercial' recordings are worth seeking out to hear a fully musical trombonist, arranger and stylist. ❖

A Kai and J.J. Tribute led by Robin Eubanks is at Jazz Standard Apr. 23rd as part of *Impulse! Nights*. See Calendar.