

WHITE ANGLO-SAXON PYTHAGOREAN

by Francis Davis

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Roswell Rudd, a trombonist now in his late fifties, will, regardless of what he accomplishes or fails to in his remaining years, always be identified with the jazz avant-garde of the 1960s, so indelible was his mark on it and its on him. Last summer I heard him sing “The Beer-Barrel Polka” as a member of a show band in a Borscht Belt resort and sound as though he was having a good time doing it. It would heighten the incongruity if I could say that I walked in on this by chance. But I didn’t. I was looking for Rudd, and I knew exactly where to find him, thanks to an item in *Down Beat*.

Toward the back of each issue that magazine runs a feature called “Pro Session,” in which a recorded improvisation is transcribed and analyzed for the edification of those readers who are themselves musicians. The subject of “Pro Session” in December 1990 was the pianist Herbie Nichols’s 1955 recording of his own “Furthermore.” The transcription and analysis were supplied by Rudd, who was identified as “a trombonist currently working in the Catskill Mountains at the Granit Hotel [in] Kerhonkson, N.Y.”:

He has recorded with Archie Shepp, Carla Bley, Gato Barbieri, Charlie Haden, and John Tchicai, and his recording, *Regeneration* (Soul Note)[,] with Steve Lacy and Han Bennink, included a number of Nichols’ compositions.

No mention of Rudd’s having thrice been voted best trombonist in the magazine’s own International Jazz Critics Poll (in 1975, 1978, and 1979), or of his having finished no worse than seventh as recently as 1987, strictly on reputation (his last New York concert had been in 1983, and he hadn’t been featured on a new jazz release since his appearance on one track of *That’s the Way I Feel Now*, the auteur record producer Hal Wilner’s 1984 double album of novel Thelonious Monk interpretations). Nor was there any hint of how long Rudd had been in the Catskills—the last I’d heard, he was teaching in Augusta, Maine, at a branch of the state university—or of what on earth he was doing there.

Much of the romance of jazz improvisation is in its evanescence, and as if in keeping with this quality, jazz musicians themselves tend to disappear. Years ago when a musician vanished from the scene, it was usually for one of two reasons: drugs, or steady work either making TV-ad soundtracks (“jingles”) in the recording studio or playing in the orchestras for films or Broadway shows, depending on which coast the person in question called home. Today when someone goes a few years between records or concerts, it’s assumed that he’s grown weary of improvising an income for himself and his dependents and has accepted a university teaching position or taken a day job. Or that he’s become homeless.

But few musicians ever disappear completely or put away their horns for good, even after learning the hard way that there’s very little chance for a big payoff in jazz. Pop musicians and their fans are often puzzled by this, for the same reason that screenwriters—even unproduced screenwriters—are puzzled by novelists, and even more so by poets (at least a novel is of some potential value as a “property”). Publication is almost anticlimactic

for most poets. They just write. It's the same with most jazz musicians. Jazz isn't just a craft; it's a calling, and one that they can never completely stop heeding.

What about those of us who merely listen to jazz? Like serial monogamists, most of us find ourselves drawn to a certain type. Mine seems to be the Missing Person—the great player who drops out of sight. Browsing in record stores these days, or listening to many of the bland new releases sent to me to review, I feel as many voters say they do when forced to choose between equally unqualified candidates: there must be something better than this. That's when I begin to think of musicians like Roswell Rudd, unforgettable but apparently forgotten, and wonder what on earth has become of them.

It was sticky even in the mountains on the Saturday afternoon last summer that my girlfriend and I drove to Kerhonkson, about twenty miles south of Woodstock. When we pulled into the parking lot of the Granit Hotel and Country Club, at around three o'clock in the afternoon, a band we later found out was the Sherri Orchestra—not the band with Rudd—was playing “Tea for Two” as a cha-cha next to the outdoor swimming pool. This was my first time in the Catskills, and I felt terribly out of place, despite having been briefed on Borscht Belt dos and don'ts by my companion, a Brooklyn native who had summered here with her parents when the Catskills were really something (what she meant was, before her parents and a massive number of Jews of their generation retired to Florida, for summer all year round). My alienation wasn't entirely due to my not being Jewish (the activities sheet we picked up in the lobby on checking in listed bocci, and where there's bocci there must be Italians), nor to my companion and I being among a distinct minority of guests under retirement age. The problem was my aversion to group activities and my bewilderment at other people's enthusiasm for them. Fortunately for me, participation in the Granit's daily shuffleboard tournament was optional, as it was in the basketball free throw contest, the isometric exercises with Sam, the financial seminar with George Kimmel, the class in skin care and “hi” fashion with Miss Jeri of Estelle Durant Cosmetics, and the open discussion (presumably on the day's burning issues) with Trudy Berlin. By virtue of our late arrival we'd missed all of these events anyway. But if we hurried, we could still compete in the daily Ping-Pong tournament, take a lesson in ballroom dancing from the Tiktins, and mingle at the happy hour in the Mystic Lounge (to the music of somebody calling himself Ralph Mellow).

Such an industrious approach to leisure struck me as Protestant, not Jewish. But my companion said that the old adage about the devil finding work for idle hands had nothing to do with it. Keeping yourself occupied from morning on was a way of ensuring that you were getting your money's worth, since most of the activities were *included*, as they say in the Catskills. So were meals and anything in between, she added, which meant never saying no to that second helping or dessert, regardless of what restrictive diet your doctor might have you on back home. To hear her tell it, food was to the Catskills as slots were to Atlantic City, the difference being that here you gambled with your cholesterol, instead of with quarters. Shuffleboard and the rest of it were just something to do between feedings.

The day's most looked-forward-to activity was dinner, which she said was going to remind me of one of her family's catered affairs without the bar mitzvah boy or the bride and groom. Were we staying at the Granit for a month or the entire season, the maitre d' would call on his knowledge of human nature to seat us at a table with couples just like ourselves, with whom we would make friends for life, perhaps even planning to meet here

again in coming summers. As things stood, however, we'd probably be put wherever there were two empty seats. Even so, she warned, small talk would be expected of me.

As we rounded the lobby into the Golden Tiara Nite Club for predinner cocktails (another excuse for noshing, because everybody knows it isn't wise to drink on an empty stomach), we heard an innocuous bossa nova above the chatter of those already helping themselves to hors d'oeuvres. It was Burt Bacharach's "The Look of Love," being played (we surmised) by David Winograd and the Granit Orchestra, the seven-piece combo that would be backing the comedian Nipsey Russell and the singer Karen Saunders at the Tiara's "Broadway Showtime" in just a few hours. Before we could spot the musicians, a trombonist broke free of the ensemble just long enough to let loose three staccato blats. He then smeared Bacharach's melody into a lopsided glissando before blending into the other horns.

I think I would have recognized that sound anywhere, and the absurdity of the setting only intensified my delight. I jokingly asked my friend what she thought our chances were of being seated for dinner with others like us who were here just to listen to the band. It should have bothered me that nobody else was paying Rudd much attention. But sometimes it's better that way—anybody who loves jazz so much that he's become somewhat possessive about it (and somewhat resigned to other people's hearing it as background music) will know what I mean. I didn't even mind it when, during the band's version of Kool and the Gang's "Celebration," an alter *kocker* doing an arthritic lindy hop in front of the tuxedoed musicians admonished "No, no, rock-and-roll," clapping his hands on the wrong beat as Rudd stretched the funk rhythm deliriously out of shape. More important, Rudd didn't seem to mind either.

Thirty years ago when Rudd was a new face in jazz, the critic Martin Williams praised him for combining "the robust earthiness of a Kid Ory plus all the refinements jazz trombone has been through since, including some of the latest developments in [jazz] as a whole." The comparison to Ory—the trombonist in Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers, and a rallied-around figure in the Dixieland revival of the 1940s—was no idle hyperbole. Rudd, while still an undergraduate at Yale, had recorded two albums of Dixieland as a member of a ragtag collegiate outfit called El's Chosen Six. This was before he obtained citizenship in the New York avant-garde through his association with Steve Lacy, Archie Shepp, Bill Dixon and Cecil Taylor. An ironic consequence of Rudd's apprenticeship as an Ivy Leaguer playing Dixieland, a style that demands a vocalized approach from its horn players, was that he became the first (and, until the emergence of George Lewis, Ray Anderson, Craig Harris, and several Europeans in the seventies and eighties, the only) trombonist capable of matching split tones and glossal outbursts with saxophonists who were bidding their horns to speak in tongues.

This is how innovation usually spreads in jazz: one or two or as many as three or four players make breakthroughs on their horns, and the rank and file play catch-up. In that fashion J. J. Johnson became the ne plus ultra of bebop trombonists by negotiating Charlie Parker's and Dizzy Gillespie's harmonic abstractions and fleet eighth-note runs with his slide. (His West Coast counterpart was the sadly overlooked Frank Rosolino.) In the case of many of Johnson's followers, though, as in the case of those who sought to emulate Tommy Dorsey's unperturbed lyricism, this meant ignoring the trombone's potential for mirth. Zipping around on their horn as though the instrument were a darker-toned and only slightly

unwieldy trumpet, they sounded like fat men running up stairs with huge bundles. They were ill suited to free improvisation, though many of them tried their hand at it.

Rudd achieved his primacy among free trombonists without emulating Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, or any of the other pacesetter saxophonists of the 1960s. He simply reversed the process begun by Johnson, reacquainting the horn with the whoops and hollers, the slow motion horse laughs and elephant snorts, that had been part of its jocular vocabulary before bop.

Thanks to his sprung time and his knack for locating dissonances between positions on his slide, he was able to do this without sounding like an old-timer who had wandered into the wrong gig. Even on dirges (his forte, as such composers as Michael Mantler and Carla Bley quickly realized), he often sounded as if he were shouting or laughing or cursing into his mouthpiece, with or without a plunger stuck in the bell of his horn to facilitate such vocal effects.

The other keepsake of his Dixieland experience that made Rudd such a valuable asset in free jazz was his commitment to collective improvisation. The problem with much bebop is that the musicians playing it are simply blowing on chord changes rather than taking full advantage of the melody and rhythm. The problem with free jazz is that even though the chord changes have been dispensed with, the musicians are frequently still just blowing. The New York Art Quartet, the band that Rudd co-led with the alto saxophonist John Tchicai for a short time in the 1960s, was notable for many virtues, not the least of them the contrapuntal chatter that Rudd and Tchicai kept up behind each other's solos. Rudd's presence in a band of more than four or five pieces virtually guaranteed attention to color and dynamics. It also guaranteed levity. He brought a touch of John Philip Sousa to one of Archie Shepp's best small groups of the late 1960s, and, a decade or so later, gleefully played the ham in the midsize ensemble led by Carla Bley, a composer who doesn't so much select sidemen as cast them to type.

Rudd's sense of himself as first and foremost an ensemble member was so unshakable that when an Italian label invited him to make a solo album, he chose instead to overdub himself singing and playing piano, bass, drums, and even extra trombone parts. That was in 1979, on *The Definitive Roswell Rudd* (Horo), an eccentric tour de force that proved to be his last opportunity to date to record an album of his own compositions. Three years later, he made *Regeneration*, featuring three pieces by Thelonious Monk as well as three by Herbie Nichols, for Soul Note, another Italian label. It was his last complete album.

The people seated next to us at dinner turned out to be Catskills regulars, a couple in their early fifties, who informed us that the Granit was strictly Grade B, right down to the entertainment. "The Concord gets Paul Anka, the Granit gets Robert Merrill," the wife complained. "If you don't have to ask if somebody's still alive, they're too big for the Granit."

Maybe so, but I doubt that any other Catskills resort boasts a band capable of jamming so euphorically on "Mack the Knife." To my surprise Rudd wasn't the only band member with impressive professional credentials: the lineup also included Bobby Johnson, about whose trumpet solo on Erskine Hawkins's 1945 recording of "Tippin' In" Gunther Schuller wrote (in his landmark book, *The Swing Era*) that it was "so admirably conceived and executed" that "one assumes the presence of one of the great trumpet stars of the period, not the well-nigh forgotten Bobby Johnson." This missing person sang a few

numbers in a swaggering voice reminiscent of Jimmy Rushing's and still played with effortless grace, despite appearing to be in his early seventies.

I actually enjoyed the show. Karen Saunders, a fine young singer whom I had never heard of, delivered a convincing "The Man I Love," with Rudd supplying a virile plunger obbligato on the slow intro. And Nipsey Russell broke up the band with a joke about a bygone Harlem jazz club where "they had an intermission every twenty minutes, to wheel out the dead and injured."

"I don't think Nipsey was having a good night, though," Rudd said, on joining us later in the Mystic Lounge. (The ivory tickler there *now* was Irving Fields, the composer of "The Miami Beach Rhumba," practically a Borscht Belt anthem, "Managua, Nicaragua," a number-one hit for both Guy Lombardo and Freddie Martin in 1947, and "Chantez, Chantez," a ditty popularized by Dinah Shore in 1957. And can you think of a better name for a songwriter than Irving Fields?) "He wasn't working the audience the way I've seen him do. He stuck to the usual order of his routines.

"Comedians are like the jazz musicians of the Borscht Belt," continued Rudd, who's closer to average in height and build than the yawp of his horn would lead you to expect. A caricature of him would emphasize his watery hazel eyes and his auburn and gray beard, which his wife says she would leave him if he ever shaved. "The high priest of comics here—the most original and articulate—is Mal Z. Lawrence. Then there's Ralph Pope, Jay Jason, Lenny Rush, and Mickey Marvin. I don't know if you've ever heard of any of them, but they're incredible. And they do improvise, within a set form. They work with a set number of variables—like a musician would with, say, twelve tones—and they shift the order of things according to how the audience is reacting. They usually start out the same and have a big thing they do at the end that brings it to a peak and lets them bow out gracefully. Like a final coda or cadenza. But in the middle, you never know where they're going next. That's the exciting part."

The following afternoon my companion and I drove to Accord, a few miles east, for brunch with Rudd and his wife, Moselle Galbraith. They live on a secluded dirt road, in a one story house as narrow as a trailer and laid out like a railroad flat. The house, though less crowded than when the couple's son, Christopher, and Moselle's two daughters from a previous marriage still lived with them, is so small that Rudd wouldn't be able to extend his slide in it without poking a hole in the ceiling or knocking Galbraith's knickknacks off the mantelpiece. (Counting Rudd's grown son from his first marriage, he and his wife have four children—"his, hers, and theirs," as Galbraith puts it.) There wouldn't be room in the house for a piano. In order to practice or to compose music, Rudd has to go deep into the nearby woods, where he says he sings and chants and dances the notes out, in addition to "just letting it burn on my horn, which I have to be careful *not* to do on the job."

It soon became apparent that the house wasn't the proper site for an interview. Galbraith, who suffers from various respiratory and intestinal ailments, was having a bad day on account of the heat (she was unable even to lift her weight out of her chair in front of the air conditioner to change from her night-gown and to comb her matted hair). So Rudd and I spoke at length on the phone a few nights later, interrupted only when Moselle had him hunt for their Shih Tzu, the smallest of their four dogs, who had crawled underneath the sofa.

Rudd was born in Sharon, Connecticut, in 1935. Despite his Hotchkiss and Yale education, he doesn't come from money. A small inheritance long since spent was all that enabled him and his wife to relocate to the Catskills in 1982, two years after Rudd was

denied tenure by the University of Maine. Both Rudd's parents were teachers in private schools, and his father—a record collector and avocational drummer—introduced him to jazz. One of his father's records that made an especially vivid impression on him was the Woody Herman Orchestra's recording of "Everywhere," featuring the tune's composer, Bill Harris, on trombone.

"It just killed me," Rudd told me. "I think a lot of it had to do with it being his own composition. It wasn't like he had to bring his musical personality to bear on somebody else's form. The song was his, and it was like I could tell that right away." (Rudd later reinterpreted Harris's ballad—half smoldering reverie, half drunken army reveille—as the title track on his first LP, in 1966). The other family member who helped to steer Rudd into music was his grandmother, "a Methodist church lady who was the director of her choir and who, on the out chorus of the hymns, would improvise a descant super libre in a high, pneumatic voice and just soar over the entire choir."

Rudd spoke with excitement about his grandmother (whom he once compared to the trumpeter Cat Anderson, the high-note specialist in Duke Ellington's band) and a number of other musical topics, including the marching bands in which he played French horn in as a teenager ("Your section was integrated into the other sections: a post-Industrial Revolution, urban hierarchical, almost Wagnerian kind of thing"), Greenwich Village jam sessions in the early sixties ("There would be as many as ten horns up there, and as a guy would be soloing, the other horns would be riffing behind him, harmonizing the riffs, and it would be like Duke Ellington used to do, only happening spontaneously"), and a love for battered upright pianos, with their weird overtones, which he inherited from Herbie Nichols, the maverick pianist who was mentor of sorts to him ("The last one I had, in Maine in 1982, just collapsed from the tension of the strings on a rotten frame").

Rudd's talk about music—which is probably all he would ever talk about if given a choice—made it obvious that he wasn't burned out on jazz and just going through the motions at the Granit. After talking with him, I still don't know the complete answer to how he got where he is. The long and the short of it might be that jazz brought him little fortune and only marginal fame. As tastes in jazz became more conservative, he found himself stigmatized, despite his consummate musicianship, as someone supposedly incapable of doing anything but making noise on his horn. He was already teaching part-time at Bard and working on and off for the folklorist Alan Lomax when the offer came along to join the faculty at Maine, in 1976. In Augusta his efforts to integrate raga and other improvisational world music forms into a jazz curriculum displeased his department head, who, one assumes, wanted a real teacher, not a gifted eccentric. After relocating to the Catskills, where a friend had a handyman's special for sale, he worked sporadically in area clubs for a few years before successfully auditioning for David Winograd at the Granit, in 1986.

Rudd's wife, a native New Yorker often mistaken for Jewish, likes to joke that he's too "white bread" for the Catskills. But even though the only stretch of green visible from the Granit's lobby is the golf course, Kerhonkson itself is rural, and Rudd says he's always more at home in rural settings (his fondest memory of Maine is its green summers, which he says "just *raged* with life"). A self-described "White Anglo-Saxon Pythagorean," Rudd is the sort of unassuming fellow who gets along fine with everyone. My girlfriend didn't even mind his addressing her as "Doll," though I'd like to see anyone else try to get away with it. Rudd was one of the very few whites welcomed into the inner circle of militant black musicians amid the tumult of the 1960s. "At that time, in New York, a major topic of

discussion was the reality of being black and playing this music versus the reality of being white and attempting to play it from a black perspective,” Bill Dixon, a trumpeter and composer now tenured at Bennington, recalled during a recent conversation we had about Rudd. “But Roz fit right in because of his musicianship and, I would have to say, his personality.”

Told how Rudd was now making his living, Dixon says, “It just proves that being a wonderful musician isn’t enough anymore. But you know, in one sense, he’s fortunate.” Rudd could be driving a taxi or painting houses or working as a plumber, a carpenter, or a camp counselor—all jobs that he has held at one time or another. (His most interesting day job was with Lomax, helping to analyze “Cantometrics,” which can be roughly defined as the measure of “song” in various ethnic musics.) Rudd’s hotel job pays family health benefits, which were a blessing when he still had teenagers living at home, and are perhaps even more of a blessing now, given his wife’s poor health. The job also gets him out of the house and lets him take pride in his craft. In some ways he’s a better musician now than he was before. His sight-reading has improved, and he and his six bandmates have had a lot of practice in paring down big-band arrangements that some of the Granit’s headliners bring along with them. He’s come to place a higher value on showmanship. “No matter how tired they might be or how few people are in the audience, the performers here go on stage and deliver,” he told me, admiringly. After speaking with Rudd, I saw his beloved Mal Z. Lawrence in a video excerpt from the show *Catskills on Broadway*, and thought he was nothing special. But even though Rudd might be giving run-of-the-mill Borscht Belt *tumblers* too much credit in comparing them to jazz improvisers, his enthusiasm for them suggests that he is one of those artists on whom nothing is wasted.

The drawbacks to the job at the Granit begin with the nagging feeling that a musician of Rudd’s stature belongs somewhere else, doing something better. As the last member of Winograd’s band to have been hired, he’s the first to be laid off when business at the hotel is slow, as it was this past winter. Even when on full-time salary at the hotel, he has to drive a bread truck five mornings a week in order to make ends meet. A number of prominent jazz musicians live in Woodstock or nearby towns, but there’s no local jazz scene to speak of—unfortunately for Rudd, whose essentially passive nature makes him one of those musicians able to blend easily into an existing scene but unable to start one around themselves. Bandleaders he worked with years ago still call him occasionally with offers to go to Europe for a few weeks, but because he’s reluctant to leave his job unprotected and his wife uncared for, he routinely turns them down. He’s said no so often that some musicians have wrongly concluded that he’s just not interested anymore.

This June, however, Rudd surprised everybody—possibly including himself—by accepting an offer to bring a quintet to Italy for the Verona Jazz Festival. (His travel costs were defrayed by Arts International, an organization that provides assistance to American performers invited to participate in festivals overseas.) Rudd was scheduled to play outdoors, but rain forced his concert into an auditorium with no amplification. Nevertheless, Rudd returned in excellent spirits. “It was beautiful to play some music,” he told me, implying a distinction between what he had performed at the festival—several of his own recent compositions, plus his arrangements of a few of Herbie Nichols’s tunes and “Kid Ory’s Creole Trombone”—and his nightly fare at the hotel.

He also said something that struck me as inconsequential at first but that I later realized summed up the unaccustomed elbow room the trip had afforded him. “At the hotel

I'm sitting behind a music stand all night. It felt good to stand up, to do my little dance as I played. They'll be sending me a video of my set. It'll be a chance for me to see myself in flight."

One gig hardly amounts to a comeback, but there might soon be others, including a foreign tour by the reassembled New York Art Quartet, featuring Rudd, John Tchicai, the drummer Milford Graves, and the bassist Reggie Workman. In the meantime Rudd is at least playing music, even if it's only "The Look of Love."

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The New York Art Quartet reunion never happened, and Rudd eventually lost his job at the Granit. The good news is that he's been working with the tenor saxophonist Allen Low.

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