

## Interview with Rob Scheps, reeds, flutes, composer, bandleader

by Ludwig vanTrikt

*Cadence: Please capture what the Boston jazz scene was like while you were there? This time saw you leading your own groups .*

R.S. Boston was vibrant and rich when I was there. Locals included George Garzone, Jerry Bergonzi, Greg Hopkins, Billy Pierce, John Lockwood, Bob Moses and Jimmy Mosher.

The clubs were the Willow, Ryles, Charlie's Tap, Wally's and 1369 Jazz Club.

My first jazz gig as a leader was at the Willow in Somerville. Ryles had music upstairs and downstairs. I saw Pat Metheny with Miroslav Vitous (another one of my teachers), and Roy Haynes.

I formed the True Colors Big Band. We played at Ryles, Johnny D's, The Rathskeller, and great sold out shows at 1369. 1369 was the hang. My Quintet played weekends there.

I heard Joe Lovano with Mel Lewis; Paul Motian Trio with Frisell and Lovano; Steve Lacy, Roscoe Mitchell, Dewey Redman, Rashied Ali, Kenny Werner, Cecil McBee and more.

I took a lesson with Lovano in the basement!

Donald Brown included me on his going away gig. We played Nefertiti with Billy Kilson on drums. That club was the locus for so many of us.

My band mates and friends were Donny McCaslin, Ken Brooks, John Medeski, Josh Roseman, Marshall Sealey, Mark Taylor, Jim Black, Chris Speed, Bruno Raberg, Ben Wittman, Dominique Eade, Andy Gravish, Dave Fiuczynski . Amazing.

I was a member of the JCA- Jazz Composers Alliance Big Band. We performed with incredible guests- Dave Holland, Sam Rivers, Anthony Davis, Henry Threadgill, Marty Ehrlich, Wayne Horvitz, Tim Berne. We made a CD, Flux, that featured Julius Hemphill and Sam Rivers.

Boston was the springboard to NYC for many of us.

*Cadence: As far as you know is the Boston jazz scene still vibrant? Let's talk about you then moving on to New York City.....*

R.S. Boston seems to be still cooking. I haven't played there in a while, but the Regatta Bar and Scullers are still going. I played with those clubs years ago and they're both good venues. They also have the Mad Monkfish and the Lily Pad. Jerry Bergonzi. has a weekly gig there with my friend, trumpeter Phil Grenadier.

I moved to New York City at age 22, a common trajectory for young musicians from Boston. A bunch of us moved there at the same time: Rachel Z, David Fiuczynski, Andy Gravish, Greg Jones and many more.

I had grown up outside of New York City, so it was familiar territory, but it's a

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shock to the system to move to New York.

Incidentally, there was a lot of work when I moved there and things got busy fairly quickly.

Jazz gigs, weddings, record dates, etc. I even did parades on Long Island because drummer Keith Copeland had told me on the road with George Russell, "when you get to New York take anything – a rehearsal, a parade, ...." I took his sage advice :-)

I got to NYC at 22. After growing up nearby on Long Island, I was familiar with Manhattan, but nobody's ever really ready to encounter it.

I called 60 friends and colleagues on the phone from Boston to touch base and let them know I was coming.

On my first day in New York, the phone rang after one hour. My girlfriend said it's for you. It was a gig with brother Jack McDuff at Showman's Café in Harlem for the following Saturday night. The gig came via my friend, McDuff's drummer Rudy Petschauer.

Typical of New York to have you dive right off the deep end. I was young and eager, and went out to play almost every night. There were jam sessions everywhere. The Village Gate on Saturday and Sunday afternoons; Pat's on 23rd St. in Chelsea on Thursday nights. My first club gigs under my own name were at the Angry Squire, also in Chelsea, which became my neighborhood. My band was Joel Weiskopf on piano; Essiet Okon Essiet on bass, and Ben Perowsky on drums. Subs were Ben Wolfe on bass; drummers Bill Stewart, Troy Davis, and others. We played all over NYC. Blue Willow, Rathbone's, First On First, Zazou, Honeysuckle, Birdland, and many gigs at the aforementioned, Angry Squire.

The Village Gate was a special club for me. I had a friend on the inside and got to see a lot of great shows for free. Dr. John with Lew Soloff and Ronnie Cuber; Toshiko Akiyoshi, and Lew Tabackin's big band; The Lounge Lizards with John Lurie, and George Gruntz's All-Star big band. Oh yeah, and a stellar show by Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra. The Gate had an upstairs, downstairs and the terrace. On the terrace I sat in with Reggie Workman and John Medeski's duo. I believe I also played with Jaki Byard and Dennis Irwin. I already knew Jaki from NEC. New York was just spilling over with Jazz. One day on the terrace of the Gate I found myself seated at a large round table with Don Friedman and Billy Hart. I turned to Ben Perowsky and said "this is unbelievable." Ben grew up in the city. Unlike me. He turned to me and said "that's New York, man". I had then and still have a 1938 Conn soprano sax. I put the horn in a basket on the back of my bicycle and rode around Manhattan sitting in. One place was Caliban on the east side.

Trumpeter Joe Magnarelli had a steady gig there and I would go and sit in with him. I once played the soprano at the Squire sitting in with Kenny Werner, Ed Schuller, and the great Rashied Ali. We played I'll Remember April and I remember being surprised and pleased at how great Rashid played straight ahead. Man, he was swinging. Living and playing in New York there's a

diaspora that spreads outside of the city where you sometimes meet other crews of musicians in Connecticut; in the Catskills; in New Jersey, etc. This was all part of my regimen, and there were connections being made constantly. In New Jersey, I played some sessions with the very great drummer Ron Davis. Ron had worked with Bill Watrous and Chuck Mangione. We played with other New Jersey-ites like guitarist Bob DeVos, bassist Dean Johnson, guitarist Dave Stryker and many others.

In New York, when you sit in you often find yourself on stage with your idols. At the Blue Note late at night I played with Lonnie Plaxico and Billy Hart. That session was seven nights a week and started around one in the morning. I recall playing with and meeting for the first time, legendary drummer Barry Altschul at a place at 47th St. and 8th Avenue called Michael's Pub. Drummer Jeff Williams took me to the Village Corner just down the street from the Gate where I met and sat in with the tremendous pianist Frank Kimbrough when Frank still had a long ponytail. Then there was Augie's. Larry Goldings first took me up there. It was at 105th and Broadway a couple of doors down from Birdland in its then location. Through Larry I met and played with epic young cats like Peter Bernstein, Bill Stewart, Freddie Bryant, Andy Watson, and Billy Drummond. This place was a casual dive bar that served as an important incubator for young bebop cats of the era. I also remember sitting in there with Jesse Davis and Joel Frahm among others. I was in a quartet that had a Saturday night residency there. Spike Wilner on piano, Sean McGloin on bass and Gene Calderazzo on drums, brother of the great pianist Joey Calderazzo. It was all happening at Augie's and that room later became what is today the jazz club Smoke. I guess you could still smoke in clubs at that time because I remember having a couple of cigarettes at the bar when bassist Tony Scherr bought me a beer. I was never a smoker, but dealing with the two guys who ran the club, Gus and Caesar, made you want to smoke and drink.

*Cadence: I am going show a bias here by asking you to give us a glimpse into two of my favorite pianists Don Friedman & Jaki Byard; particularly what they were like as men. Of course anything musically that they imparted on you?*

Don Friedman, as we know, was the pianist on two classic Booker Little records -Out Front and Victory and Sorrow. He was also a member of Clark Terry's band for many years.

He was a gentle guy whom I didn't know very well. Always cordial and nice though.

The most I played with him was on a record date at Tony Bennett's studio in Englewood, New Jersey on the day before Thanksgiving. An honor.

I enjoyed his playing on that date. It was swinging, smart and elegant. Hendrik Muerkens played vibes on that date too.

Jaki was a whole different kettle of fish. He was on the faculty at NEC for years, but had whittled down his presence to one day a month by the time I arrived.

Trombonist/ arranger Pete McGuinness and I formed the True Colors Big Band and we performed in Jordan Hall with Jaki as guest soloist on piano. We played his spectacular charts, including Spanish Tinge#2 and Garr.

Jaki was very funny. When people were skating and not really making the chart, Jaki would say, “ lies, lies, lies”.

He was originally from Worcester Mass, but became an in demand pianist in Boston. By the time we played with him, he lived in New York. He also played alto sax.

When I was at camp in Pennsylvania at age 13, our big band played Spanish Tinge, so I was aware of Jaki even back then.

As you can tell from recordings with Charles Mingus, Jaki played the whole history of jazz piano from stride up through free jazz.

Jaki was a masterful musician and a mentor we all loved.

***Cadence: Let's talk nuts & bolts stuff regarding your abilities as a multi instrumentalists; particularly your ability to play the soprano saxophone?***

R.S. Many musicians over the recent years have seemingly abandoned playing the soprano because of the difficulty of keeping it in tune. Please talk about how you balance playing multiple instruments against the backdrop of a very busy musical and personal life.

Well, my main axes are tenor sax, soprano, sax, and flute.

For many years, it's been split between tenor and soprano equally. They are both homebase.

I started playing soprano in high school. We had a very good jazz band, and I played lead alto which meant doubling on soprano, particularly for Thad Jones's Charts.

Sidney Bechet was the first important soprano soloist, although he also played clarinet.

To me soprano playing focuses on John Coltrane, Steve Lacy, Wayne Shorter, Dave Liebman, Jane Ira Bloom and Steve Grossman . These are the most important stylists on the instrument.

Coltrane made the soprano his other main instrument along with tenor as did Wayne Shorter a few years later with Miles. Coltrane's sound changed at the beginning. It was a little nasal and more oboe like. I feel like later he found his center and created a beautiful round tone. He mostly played it on waltzes Take A Look, My Favorite Things, Chim Chim Cheree, Afro Blue, Inchworm, but he used a lovely warm sound on ballads like Every Time We Say Goodbye. It was also the exact right instrument for India.

Wayne Shorter is another role model for playing tenor and soprano sax equally well. The soprano was made for Wayne.

His work on it with Miles Davis, Joni Mitchell, and Weather Report bears this out. I saw Wayne live about six times and it was amazing..

Lacy was a different kind of duck. He came to Portland frequently with his bands. I also saw his sextet as Sweet Basil in New York. His approach to the

horn was unusual. He extended the range upwards into the altissimo. But what he did that was unique was he extended the low range by playing the horn against his leg. I've tried to incorporate both of these techniques having more success on the upper end.

I spoke to Steve once at a party after a concert in Portland. A thoughtful guy. We talked about his time with Gil Evans.

Leibman was one of my teachers in Canada and famously played only soprano for about 15 years. That's what he was doing when I got to know him. His singular Yogi-like journey on the soprano while issuing the tenor made him into one of the great sopranos stylists. I learned a ton from him over the years.

Jane is a very nice person. I invited her to one of my gigs via postcard once. She wrote me a nice letter expressing regret and having to miss my show. Later she sent me a chart of her tune *Mighty Lights* in the mail.

She may have been the first one to use electronics effectively on the soprano. Grossman played more soprano than tenor when he joined Miles replacing Wayne Shorter.

I saw him with McCoy Tyner at Sweet Basil but he was only playing tenor then. Joe Farrell was also an important soprano player using it on his own records like *Moon Germs* and *Outback*, but also playing spectacularly on Chick Corea records such as *Return To Forever*, and *The Leprechaun*. Cadence: You seem to maintain a busy schedule as a working musician; but do you have a working band tours? Sometimes. But my model is a little different. I have regular bands in seven cities. The primary one is the Rob Scheps Coretet in New York City. The other bands are in Seattle, Portland, Denver, Atlanta, Kansas City, and Honolulu.

The regular band in each of these cities has pretty steady personnel and consists of very adept cats, so I can play my music with all of them.

Right now in June 2024 the New York band is working a series of dates, but in September, it'll be The Seattle band.

**Cadence:** *Wow this is a playing model that I never heard of.....*

R.S. It works well and allows for some variety of interpretation.

**Cadence:** *The trajectory of artist decades past was (particularly saxophonists) to do a ballad album, a big band and strings recording and finally a date featuring the standard jazz repertoire. Could you imagine doing this?*

R.S. Maybe so. I find that to be mostly an antiquated model.

I prefer to mix and match, but to still create records that have a thread and some cohesion.

That said, there are certainly great examples of these particular kinds of record dates. Bird with Strings, Clifford Brown with Strings, Billie Holiday - Lady In Satin. Zoot Sims - Waiting Game.

John Coltrane struck gold when he made Africa Brass volumes one and two. I believe Eric Dolphy and McCoy Tyner were responsible for the orchestrations. Trane sounds fantastic with a modern big band exploring some of the modes

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and chords he was using in his quartet, in expanded versions. Records of standards are a dime a dozen, there are tons of them. Some of them, of course are great. Baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan made an interesting record titled *Hidden Treasures*, where he played great tunes that were relatively unknown but written by well-known composers.

That was an interesting CD.

The Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra made some great sides with singers like Ruth Brown and Joe Williams. Of course, Thad's arrangements were perfect. Ultimately, though whatever kind of record you want to make, there should be some stylistic cohesion or even an underlying plot. Just my viewpoint.

***Cadence: So glad we're doing the interview because I as a listener never had a complete picture of your performance life. Roughly we have tracked your arrival in New York City over twenty years ago. Were you able to always sustain a career just playing and recording during the subsequent years leading up to now?***

R.S. Yes, my career has been moderately sustainable. Even when I lived in New York City, I was working in New Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island, Massachusetts, and occasionally Providence, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Philadelphia!

Ever since I got a car, I have been booking gigs out of town and stretching the limits of where I go to play. There were periods where I was mostly around in Boston working; or in New York City as the surrounding area working. But my MO seems to be one of peripatetic wanderlust.

Tonight I performed at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. The last gig before that was at a church in Scottsdale, Arizona.

In the near future, I have a series of gigs in New York State, two composition residencies in Idaho and Pennsylvania; A series of shows in Oregon and Washington state; and things down the pike in New Mexico, Arizona and possibly Texas.

Recording is a part of my job. It happens in New York, Boston, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Oregon, Kansas City, Seattle, Honolulu, etc..

I love going to Europe. In recent years, I played in Munich, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo, and in Finland.

There were always excellent local musicians to play with. I like to go to museums in these cities and learn about the local history of each place.

Actually, one of the best recent museums was the Dinosaur Museum in Price Utah. The Phoenix and Tucson areas also have excellent museums.

We're never gonna see it all and learn it all, but we can try. Glad to talk about working with Al Grey, George Russell, John Abercrombie, and others.

***Cadence: Please talk about your long association with The Gil Evans Orchestra beginning of course with the man himself?***

***Meeting him and your subsequent involvement with the group (that continues beyond his passing)?***



R.S. I started playing with the Gil Evans Orchestra at the great club Sweet Basil in New York City on March 1, 1993. Trumpeter Miles Evans-Gil's son, hired me after we played together on a Bob Moses record.

On my first gig, I played alto sax, soprano sax, flute, and soprano sax.

The first piece we played on the first set was Jimi Hendrix's Little Wing. A Gil standard. I played every Monday there for a year. The somewhat shifting personnel included saxophonists Chris Hunter and Alex Foster; trombonist David Bargeron; trumpeters Lew Soloff, Alex Sipiagin, and Miles Evans; pianists Gil Goldstein and Delmar Brown; bassist Mark Egan; and drummer, Kenwood Dennard. Master guitarist Hiram Bullock was a frequent guest. The subs were out of this world, trumpeter Ryan Kisor, bassist Darryl Jones; and trombonists Robin Eubanks and Conrad Herwig. The band also played the Cutting Room in NYC.

A very memorable gig was the Spoleto festival in Charleston SC in 1994. For that show, we had the expanded orchestra with three french horns, Tom Malone on trombone and tuba, five trumpets, and multiple woodwinds. I played flute, piccolo, alto flute, clarinet and bass clarinet. I believe Maria Schneider conducted. The band played the Wall To Wall Miles Festival at Symphony Space on the upper west side of New York. We performed the album Sketches of Spain in its entirety with Maria conducting and Wallace Roney stepping in for Miles as the trumpet soloist. What a gig that was.

Also on that festival were Joe Lovano, Tom Harrell, Mulgrew Miller, Cameron Brown, Eddie Henderson, Joe Locke, and Jimmy Cobb, whom I got to speak with in the dressing room. I performed one concert with Gil in Boston. My time with the Orchestra starting in 1993 was after his passing..

Cadence: This next question regards the late great guitarist John Abercrombie and what you mentioned to me as being hundreds of performances. Please as with the prior artists that you mentioned give us a glimpse into both the man, his artistry and any interesting stories from those years?

To clarify, I played with John an awful lot, but it was not 100s of performances. It was a number of live shows coupled with hundreds of sessions at his house.. we played together many many times.

The repertoire usually consisted of standards mixed with John's original compositions, often the newest ones.

He had a great sense of humor, a very funny guy, and he was a raconteur. He told great stories and often I would hang with him hours after the rest of the band had gone home.

We also used to frequent a Chinese restaurant near his house called Golden House. They had a tank filled with giant goldfish. There was a waiter named Wing.

This is where John taught me to drink a martini his way. Vodka martini up dry with a lemon twist. I have often ordered this drink in a posthumous salute to him.

Many of the stories he told were about his contemporaries, the cats he came up

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with Chick Corea, Dave Holland, Randy and Mike Brecker, Greg Kogan, Richie Beirach, Dave Liebman, Gene Perla, Ralph Towner, Glen Moore, and many others. It was a hang hearing these stories but it was also an oral history that John shared with me. That was priceless..

Stories about the band Dreams, and his time as a sideman with Billy Cobham also factored in. He expressed on many occasions that the two most important influences he ever had were Jim Hall and Bill Evans.

When you know this, it informs your listening to John in a different way.

He was one of my best friends and I loved him. It's a huge loss, not having him here.

***Cadence: What is equally fascinating about your playing with John Abercrombie is he rarely recorded with saxophonists in his groups; did you ever record together?***

R.S. Thanks. Of course it was an honor to play with John; almost always in quartets. John did have a CD with Joe Lovano. I think it was called Within A Song. He also toured with saxophonist Billy Drewes in his band a little bit. I played tenor and soprano with John. We performed together in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York... We had a band called the John Abercrombie/Rob Scheps Quartet. Drummer Eliot Zigmund and bassist David Kingsnorth rounded out the band.

John had a series of excellent bands throughout his career, but it should be noted that for the last 10 or 15 years of his life, he had a stellar quartet with Marc Copland on piano, Drew Gress on bass and Joey Baron on drums. That band had a special alchemy that wouldn't have worked with any other group.

***Cadence: Let's conclude this interview by describing some of the various bands that you have led and currently are at the helm of?***

R.S. Sure.

In Boston in the 80s, I had the True Colors Big Band, an all star aggregation with players such as Donny McCaslin, John Medeski, Curtis Hasselberg, Marshall Sealy, Andy Gravish, Wes Wirth, Josh Roseman, Chris Speed, Dave Finucane, Kenny Brooks, Doug Yates. Incredible energy, and creativity.

I also started the Rob Scheps quintet featuring such players as Joel Weiskopf, Ian Froman, and Kerry MacKillop.

Both bands performed around Boston at various clubs: the Willow, Ryles, the Western Front, the Middle East, Charlie's Tap and the venerable 1369 Jazz Club which we talked about before. Also, the Boston Globe jazz festival.

Other odd venues ranging from the Rathskeller known as The Rat to the comedy club Catch A Rising Star, Brandeis University and the private Algonquin Club.

The repertoire was eclectic, running from Sun Ra to the Dirty Dozen Brass Band.

In New York, I began the Rob Scheps Coretet. We played all over the city. This band was the embryonic beginning of the band I still lead today in fact as I write this, we're playing in New York City tonight at the Cutting room on Park

Avenue.

Variants of the Coretet occur when traveling outside of New York.

Coretet North above NYC;

Coretet West in Portland, Oregon

And Coretet Oahu in Hawaii.

Usually 4 to 5 pieces, the group expands and contracts based on circumstances, allowing for some flexibility.

There was a sextet version in New York City that went about 8 years with stable personnel. We played a zillion New York area clubs, but also headlined at the Ottawa Jazz Festival in Canada.

The Coretet and its current incarnation has been together about 14 years. Jim O'Connor on trumpet, Jamie Reynolds on piano, Cameron Brown on bass, Anthony Pinciotti on drums, and myself on saxophone and flute.

In Portland, I formed Rob Scheps Big Band. It started out as a small big band with seven horns.

It quickly expanded to a full 16 piece as needed by the charts we were playing. This band was extremely eclectic playing everything from Weather Report to Bob Mintzer to originals. It was very exciting, but a little tamer and less wild than True Colors had been in Boston.

In 1997 I formed a jazz/funk unit with my friend Kim Clarke the bassist from Defunkt and Joe Henderson. I had seen Kim many times in New York City with Defunkt and was very impressed. Her adaptability on electric bass led us to form this kind of musical hybrid band called Magnets!

We released the CD entitled Live at the Earshot Jazz Festival. It was recorded live on Halloween night in Seattle and came out pretty great. Kim is from Queens, New York and has a history of booking us in her hometown area. In this band I play(ed) tenor and soprano.

A main objective when we formed the band was to play Kim's quirky, funky original music. I contribute fewer compositions to this band than I do to others. Vibraphonist Bryan Carrott plays in the band and we have gone through a succession of drummers including Ronnie Burrage and Bill McClellan.

The more recent model of the Coretet is to have steady versions of the band in multiple cities. Outside of the main group in New York I have bands in Kansas City, Seattle, Portland, Denver, Honolulu, and now Atlanta.

There are great resourceful musicians everywhere that allow me to bring this music to different places and share it with new audiences.

I'd like to share what I picked up from Sam Rivers- what you say on the mic when you have kind of a light crowd is "tell them what they missed! "

I published a book in 2023 entitled Rob Scheps : 30 Original Compositions. I have been composing more prolifically since 2019 than ever before. There are 25 new pieces just since the publication of the book, and my band focuses on these compositions in performance and recording now.

Music is a continuum and my approach is to try to integrate the past and the future into the now and keep going while expanding and changing the music.

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ROB SCHEPS MUSIC

ROB SCHEPS:  
30 ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS

