



## Rick DellaRatta

### A Thought Provoking interview with Rick DellaRatta

#### Artist Interview by: Beatrice Richardson

Jazz Photo - Link to Website DellaRatta is a crafter, not solely of music in the general sense, but of a specific ambiance. A jazz artist with a distinctive style augmented by equally distinctive accompanying musicians. DellaRatta doubles as the vocalist and pianist in a swinging quartet. He is equally in depth in both roles.

#### **JazzReview.com: Tell me about the earliest experience with music you remember and maybe some of the things that sparked your interest in music, Jazz in particular.**

DellaRatta: I first became interested in music when a piano appeared in my house. I think what happened was my father had bought a piano for my mother because she used to play the piano. She was actually a church organist. But the guy who was moving the piano in on Christmas Eve was a big fat guy and I thought he was Santa Claus. I didn't know what he was moving in either. I was only 5 or 6 years old. So when that came into the house I started to go up and sneak and play it. I was fascinated it made sounds, I listened and tried to figure this instrument out all by myself. That's when I had an inkling that improvisation was going to be basically a major part of my existence.

Anyway my parents found out about it and took me to have piano lessons. And I studied classical music. I heard pop music and rock music on the radio with my friends. I was polarized and something told me to go to the library. That there was this other kind of music and I really needed to hear it. I'm not sure what sparked me to do this but I ended up going to the library on my own and looking through a big volume of jazz records. I took these records out of the library on my own and began listening to them. I would just pick them randomly. I would look and say hmmm Ornette Coleman, this guy looks interesting let me try him, let me try John Coltrane, try this one, try that one. It just became fascinating to me. It was really hard for me to follow what they were doing, yet I knew they were doing something along that was along the creative energy, the improvisation energy, the improvisation energy I had when I stood up at the piano just standing when I reached my hand along top of the keys and made sound. So, I felt a correlation between what they were doing and what I was doing, when I was trying to create and figure out the piano all by myself. So I ended up spending a lot of time at the piano pretending I was practicing my lessons but really improvising and creating on my own. Fortunately, I did play classical music enough to get into a music school that had jazz in it.

Once I got into New England Conservatory I was able to study with Jaki Byard. He was really my first jazz teacher ( he just passed away). That wasn't until I was in college. I was playing in rock and roll bands where I was improvising and playing dance bands. I was also improvising a lot in church. But I really didn't have that much of a grasp of jazz improvisation concepts. So I

was able to get started with Jaki on the side I was a classical piano major. I was able to sneak into the jazz department and get a sneak. And it took off from there.

**JazzReview.com: When did you know that you wanted to play jazz music as a career?**

DellaRatta: I knew I had a feeling that music was going to be my career at a very early age. Because I felt A) a need to create and improvise and B). I felt a need to reach people through the healing process of music, So, I saw how the feeling of popular music would generate in people almost like a healing and uplifting feeling in pop, gospel and a lot of forms of music. I saw the spirituality of creative improvisation and I knew that there was some sort of combination I wanted. At the time I wasn't sure. I studied all forms of music including classical extensively. Until I got to the point where I felt I wanted to do something that was not only satisfying for myself artistically but also could make a contribution as vocalist and a jazz instrumentalist.

**JazzReview.com: Who have been some of your greatest inspirations and influences? What was it about them that made such an impression on you?**

DellaRatta: Actually it was a counselor when I went to a camp. The camp counselor's name was Bill Allen, we used to go on hikes together and he used to turn me on to music. Some of the music he turned me on to was very creative sort of progressive rock, some of the music had a lot of classical influence, and then he would also turn me on to a band called Weather Report that was an offshoot of Miles Davis' electric group that had Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul and numerous different great players who came and went. In addition Chick Corea's "Return To Forever" and I noticed those guys kind of enabled me to go into other forms of jazz. It was stepping stone to other forms of jazz. It was an indirect influence into the whole world of jazz.

**JazzReview.com: Not many artists play and sing. Does having to sing while you play the piano make it difficult?**

DellaRatta: I honestly never realized it, when I started singing I was first singing in bands because I had a different type of voice. The group felt I could make a contribution in terms of the way I could sing certain songs that would fit that mold. After that I started to get a lot of work as a solo pianist vocalist and traveling around the country and in doing so I saw the ability of my voice to reach people in a different way than the instrumental side was. When I would come back from those tours and just play the piano in jazz groups after a while I started to miss the ability to reach the audiences. I would feel almost caged a little bit because I knew there was something inside of me that could reach these people but the other guys didn't really know it. I was the one who recently got off the tour as a vocalist and they still knew me as a piano player. I was confined because when I was toying as a singer I saw the way I could reach people and possibly draw them into jazz and communicate the jazz more.

As a leader it just became natural for me to become a singer and instrumentalist. I'll tell you something I didn't realize being a singer would actually make me a better piano player. One day I was in a hotel, The Gramercy Park Hotel in NY. I was playing there and Michel Petrucciani walked into the lounge, well he was the one that brought it to my attention. He was in the lounge he listened for awhile then he went out. I guess he was registering in the hotel, and then he came back into the lounge and stayed for quite some time. After a couple of sets I said, gee maybe I should say hello, so I went and said hello to him, and he said, "sit down I want to talk to you". And we began talking. He began to tell me of how great it was that a). I knew the lyrics to

all the standards I was singing and b). I was singing and playing, he said, that's so important in your lyricism and developing your own voice. He really enlightened me to the fact that it was very likely that my singing was going to make me a better pianist. That's what ended up happening I ended up noticing that my singing made me a better pianist. I think singing has helped me to be in a supportive role for other singers or instrumentalists.

**JazzReview.com: You've toured extensively, What differences have you noticed between European jazz audiences and American jazz audiences?**

DellaRatta: Americans take the music for granted it seems a bit more than European audiences. Most recently in Europe I was in Bulgaria, and there it was just a fascination with them. It seemed like they were starved for it. They just couldn't wait to hear the music, enjoy it, and be a part of it. They really felt like it was something special. Part of it has to do with the fact that it is not as accessible to them. Here people take it for granted. Over there especially in a place like Bulgaria they don't know when they'll get it again. Sometime they may have a couple of festivals a year. They don't have as many opportunities. I think they cherish the opportunity to hear jazz more than here where they feel if they miss it today, they can see it tomorrow. Also because it's not imported, it's not presented correctly. The way it's presented over there is much greater a lot of times, here the owners try to make an extra buck off of the music and try to use it in that format. It's not really presented whereas over there it's an import. And so the presentation is a better presentation.

**JazzReview.com: What kind of toll does touring non stop take on you?**

DellaRatta: I think there's a certain unknown that's what takes a lot out of you. Because you don't know what to expect, you're working with different promoters, different agents, different sets of circumstances. It's the incredible amounts of uncertainty that takes the most out of you. But at the same time it makes it exciting. The unexpected has 2 ramifications 1) it creates a certain excitement and 2) it zaps a lot of energy because a lot of adapting has to take place. Some situations are the travel that takes place others are the planes or the variables surrounding it. The unexpected and the unknown are what takes the most out of you.

**JazzReview.com: What's your favorite part of your job composing, recording, performing or a combination of all three?**

DellaRatta: A combination of the three because composing is like giving birth and performing is watching the birth grow up. They both have their drawbacks and good points. One problem with performing is the performance situation it can be heaven or hell. It depends on how you're presented and who you're performing with and the music you're performing. It's also the magic in the music when you're performing. All those variables make it extremely challenging to have an ideal situation every time. Performing would be the most exciting if the situation was at its most optimum but those optimums are unfortunately the exception and not the rule.

**JazzReview.com: I would like to talk you about 2 of your releases "Thought Provoking " and "Live In Brazil" I notice on both releases the track "Living inside a Dream" is on both of them?**

DellaRatta: Very simply you'll find that in live recordings, because sometimes a song takes off with a certain audience from a studio recording and naturally you'll want to perform that song

live. That song was actually made into a music video. That song has a certain amount of appeal to many cultures. People in Asia, Europe, USA there are people who hear that song in many cultures. Even in Africa, Although I've never been to Africa I heard there's an interest in that song.

**JazzReview.com: In "Thought Provoking" I really like the release "Everything I have is Yours"**

DellaRatta: It's one of those tunes, The great thing about it is that it hasn't been recorded a lot. To take a song that people may not have heard, it's a gem. The gem of a standard.

**JazzReview.com: Your rendition on the track "If I only had a brain" that was exceptionally done.**

DellaRatta: Thanks, I enjoyed doing it.

**JazzReview.com: The track "Say you'll be mine" That was one of my favorites, so much so I shared the words with someone very close to me.**

DellaRatta: Thank you so much. My brother was getting married and I wanted to write something to express his love. I looked at their relationship and I saw how he felt towards her. I wanted to write something that he felt for his bride to be. So I wrote that song and that was their first dance at their wedding. A very different version of that song will be coming out soon. A Solo Studio Release called "Alone Together" and that's my next CD. It will initially be coming out on a web site MCY. It's a new site. It's starting a CD where you can download the music. And it's launched in June. The release will be actually coming out in the fall but coming out exclusively on the music web site mcy.com

**JazzReview.com: What prompted you to record the track "When it's sleepy time down south"?**

DellaRatta: It's a song I've always loved by Louis Armstrong, It's one of his great standards that he sings. I was playing at the Blue Note. And I had some people come there from the South. Actually my cousin had come in he's originally from Florida and he had been in town and he came to see me and there were some people from the south. And I thought this would be a good song to play. I had gone to Florida ever since I was a little kid. My mother's originally from Florida. This feeling for Everglades and even though I've never been to Louisiana or Mississippi where that song is about I still have that feeling of the Everglades, that lazy kind of feeling that you get in the south. I tried to bring that in my rendition of the song.

**JazzReview.com: You've won the 1997 Backstage award, the 1997 and 1998 Mac award nominee, 1998 ASCAP popular award winner. What do you see in terms of your future?**

DellaRatta: I like to do more in the US. I'd like to help jazz gain more popularity in the US. in my own country. So I'd like to use some of my popularity. So I'd like to use some of my notoriety and things I've built up in other countries, in other places and if there was anyway possible in terms of helping jazz broaden and reach more people in this country, maybe bring jazz to the level here that it exist in so many other countries.

**JazzReview.com: Do you have specific goals in mind you want to share with us?**

DellaRatta: One of the greatest thing I'd like to do is perform when it's at the optimum situation and presented properly, when I have the opportunity to really express myself as an artist and when performing with top notch musicians. A goal of mine is to make those optimum situations that I enjoy so much and I feel I can reach people with my music. My goal would be to make those situations the norm instead of the exception. So that would be a definite goal of mine. I have musical goals that I'm always trying to achieve and I'd hope to achieve those that are in front of me.

**JazzReview.com: In " Live in Brazil" included in your trio was one of my favorite drummers, The Late Denis Charles. What was it like working with him?**

DellaRatta: It was really in many cases almost heavenly. I had the opportunity to not only play with someone who was as influential an artist as Denis but also in touring with him, we got to spend a lot of time together. Long 9-10 hour plane flights traveling to different places. I was able to benefit from his experience, his expertise and his views on life. I feel like I really learned a lot from him and I felt flattered immensely by the support I got from him both musically and spiritually. Just to have someone of that stature so supportive of me and what I was doing. I just felt honored.

**JazzReview.com: I've loved music all my life and I've met all kinds of musicians, jazz musicians stand out to me for a couple of reasons, They are very soulful people, they're very warm, honest and hip. Do you notice this as well?**

DellaRatta: Yes, I must say the experience of the life of jazz, it's a rewarding spiritual experience. You are instilled with something we are all able to pick up on. Often when we meet each other we can sense a similarity of experience that a life of jazz has brought us. It's the same with the listeners.

**JazzReview.com: How much of making it in the music business is raw talent versus hand work and dedication?**

DellaRatta: I think the problem is that there's a huge disparity between making it as an artist and making it in terms of making a living. There are personal goals that you want to achieve as an artist that don't necessarily have anything to do with your ability to make living financially as an artist. So unfortunately there's a conflict you're posed with a situation where you're tempted in order to make ends meet than you like on the business side of things. And you worry about it taking away from reaching your artistic goals. It often becomes conflicting in what you need to do to become a successful and in the business side of music often conflicts with what you feel you need to do in terms of achieving your own musical goals.

**JazzReview.com: Where will you be performing next?**

DellaRatta: I just came back from Philadelphia. I was playing with a Brazilian band, A Brazilian rhythm section from NY along with some fine horn players from Philadelphia. I have a few gigs in NYC and Conn. One in Hartford with my own trio at the 880 jazz club and another Main and Hopewell with my quartet. The clubs are getting smaller. The festivals are once a year and they make you feel you are going to a jazz festival and there is no jazz. It's mixed with other forms of

music. But where is the jazz. There's something that needs to be changed and that's what I hope to do. I do something that I feel is marketable yet it doesn't eliminate jazz. Whereas, most marketable supposedly jazz artist don't have much jazz in their act. I can't do it on my own, someone will have to recognize that I'm trying to do this and I think I can make a contribution. Give me the opportunity to make that contribution to bring jazz to the table without alienating an audience that just don't know what jazz is. What I'm hoping for is some of these festivals to get to the point where they say instead of an act that has no jazz in it why don't we bring Rick and see if Rick can reach the generic audience and still give them jazz. That's my goal.

**JazzReview.com: What advice would you give someone who thinks he or she might want to pursue a career in jazz?**

DellaRatta: There is a great guitarist I played with name Mike Goodrich who said to me if you have to play jazz, if it's something you don't have to do then by all means avoid it. But if it's something you have to do. Then do it. There's no profession like it. All the rewards in the world are open to you. So I think you must follow your star, follow your heart and don't worry about the obstacles. You will be rewarded one way or another. Even though so few artist get rewarded with a record contract or acclaim or publicity or gigs and so many great artist have struggled and died penniless and every thing. And even though it's all that adversity, I recall Larry Willis, The great pianist once told me. One of the keys to life is to create opportunity from adversity. Therefore, my advice is follow your star and you'll be glad you did.

For more information: <http://interjazz.com/delarata>

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