

Bravo Rava: Italy's Jazz Maestro Returns to New York

George De Stefano (February 16, 2008)



Enrico Rava, Italy's most renowned jazz musician, comes to New York this month for a four-day engagement at Manhattan's Birdland (February 20-23).

Jazz lovers, and especially aficionados of Italian jazz, are in for a treat this month. Enrico Rava, the trumpeter who is Italy's most renowned jazz artist, will play a four-day engagement at Birdland in Manhattan. With him will be two other exceptional musicians: Italian pianist Stefano Bollani, a rising star on both the Italian and international jazz scenes, and the septuagenarian American drummer Paul Motian, whose singular style is one of the great pleasures of contemporary jazz.

Joining Rava, Bollani, and Motian will be bassist Larry Grenadier and saxophonist Mark Turner, two talented younger musicians who, with drummer Jeff Ballard, constitute the trio, Fly



Enrico Rava, born in Trieste in 1939 and raised in Torino, has had an amazing career of more than 40 years. He has played on more than 90 recordings and as a leader on more than twenty. Rava commands virtually the entire history of jazz, from classic New Orleans styles – he started out as a Kid Ory-influenced trombonist – to avant garde, “free” playing.

Praised for his warm, burnished tone, Rava exemplifies Italian jazz. His free jazz leanings notwithstanding, Rava has always been a melodic and lyrical player. The blues, swing, and free improvisation are in his music, but so are Italian folk songs, popular melodies, and operatic arias. One of my favorites of his many recordings is *Italian Ballads*, a 1996 album whose selections include Nino Rota film themes (“Juliet of the Spirits”), Neapolitan canzone (“Torna a Surriento”), and arias (“Un Bel Di, Vedremo”).

Rava got the jazz bug from listening to his older brother’s record collection in the late 1940s. In 1957 he had an epiphany that would set him on his life’s course as a musician. He went to a concert in Torino that featured legendary saxophonist Lester “Prez” Young and an exciting young trumpeter named Miles Davis.

“I had many records of Miles,” Rava recalled in an interview last year with the online magazine *All About Jazz*. “He was my favorite trumpet player. But I didn’t even think about playing trumpet. Then I saw Miles.” “It was a very good group and Miles was so great...That night, I said, wow, I must try to play this instrument...I was almost 18, maybe 17 and a half. I got a hold of this trumpet and I learned it by myself, just listening to Miles records, Chet Baker records.”

In 1962 Rava met Leandro “Gato” Barbieri, the Argentine saxophonist of Genoese roots, who urged him to become a fulltime musician. Two years later he joined Barbieri’s band and with him recorded the soundtrack for director Giuliano Montaldo’s film, “Una Bella Grinta.”

During the 1960s, Rava recorded and performed with many of the leading exponents of the free jazz movement. In Rome he met the American soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy and with him formed a quartet that also included the exiled South African musicians Johnny Dyani and Louis Moholo. The quartet recorded the album *The Forest and the Zoo* in 1966 while in Buenos Aires.

In 1967, Rava went to New York, where he fell in with some of that era’s boldest exploratory musicians: pianist Cecil Taylor, trombonist Roswell Rudd, saxophonist Marion Brown, former John Coltrane drummer Rashied Ali, bassist Charlie Haden, and trumpeter Hannibal Marvin Peterson. After a brief Italian sojourn, he returned to Manhattan in 1969, where he lived for the next nine years. During this time he joined pianist-composer Carla Bley’s *Jazz Composer’s Orchestra*, playing on her landmark album, *Escalator over the Hill*.

In 1972, Rava made *Il Giro del Giorno in 80 Mondi*, his first album as a bandleader, for the Milan-based Black Saint label. Three years later, he recorded *The Pilgrim and the Stars*, his debut on ECM records, the German label founded in 1969 by producer Manfred Eicher. From 1975 to 1986, he made a number of outstanding albums for ECM, both as a leader of his own group and in collaboration with the Argentine accordionist Dino Saluzzi and the avant garde Italian *Instabile Orchestra*.

Rava left ECM in 1986, but continued to record prolifically for various small companies while also extensively performing and touring. He returned to ECM in 2003, and over the following four years released several excellent recordings: *Easy Living* (2004), *Tati* (2005), with Stefano Bollani and Paul



Motian, *The Third Man* (with Bollani, 2007) and *The Words and the Days* (2007).

On *The Words and the Days*, Rava is accompanied by some fine younger Italian musicians who make up his regular performing quintet: Gianluca Petrella, trombone; Andrea Pozza, piano; Rosario Bonaccorso, double-bass; and Roberto Gatto, drums. One of the best things about *The Words and the Days* is Rava's interplay with trombonist Petrella; together they make up an exciting frontline for a terrific band. The album's production also is superb, with the stunning clarity and depth of sound characteristic of ECM, each instrument so defined that you'd think the band was playing "live" in your living room.

Rava is certainly cognizant of his preeminent place in Italian jazz. "I think I started a lot of things in Italy because I was the first Italian guy to go to New York and stay there and play with American musicians," he told *All About Jazz*. "I was the first one to record for an international label, the first one ever to have a big interview in *Downbeat* [the best-known jazz magazine]. Before me, there was no focus on that [Italian jazz]. No one knew that there were Italian jazz musicians."

Today's Italian jazz scene is thriving, with many outstanding musicians, a number of whom Enrico Rava has discovered or nurtured, like Stefano Bollani. Jazz festivals are held every year all over Italy, the best known being Umbria's, which attracts musicians and fans from all over the world. Italian music schools all have jazz departments, the music can be heard on the radio, and there are several prominent journals and magazines, with *Musica Jazz* the best-known.

Enrico Rava is Italy's most distinguished contributor to what jazz great Ornette Coleman called "the art of the improvisers." His upcoming New York engagement at Birdland is an occasion da non perdere – not to be missed.

ENRICO RAVA / STEFANO BOLLANI QUARTET

Enrico Rava (trumpet)

Stefano Bollani (piano)

Larry Grenadier (bass)

Paul Motian (drums)

Mark Turner (sax, Feb 22-23)

February 20-23

BIRDLAND

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