



The squealing, blues-drenched, rasp of David Sanborn's alto saxophone is without doubt one of the most immediately recognisable and distinctive sounds in contemporary jazz. He's been plying his trade for five decades now, having begun his career in the ranks of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band in the 1960s. It wasn't until the 1970s, though, that his talent was exposed to a wider audience. That was largely due to a sideman stint with rock icon, David Bowie, who used the saxophonist as a featured instrumentalist on his 1975 album 'Young Americans.' This led to Florida-born Sanborn becoming a recording artist in his own right and embarking on a solo career that to date has witnessed 23 albums. Sanborn's latest opus is 'Here & Gone,' his first offering since 2005's 'Closer.' During a recent promotional visit by Sanborn to London, www.soulandjazzandfunk.com's Charles Waring caught up with the 63-year-old saxophone maestro to talk about his latest recording venture.

What's the story behind your new album, 'Here & Gone'?

I was downloading stuff on to my iPod and ran across an old Hank Crawford record and I just thought wow, that's great music: I'd like to kind of connect to it and the spirit of what that music was. So I just found myself messing around with it and before I knew it I thought it would be nice to go back to that kind of sound - a small horn section of five horns - and that kind of context for myself. I basically play the same way but it depends on the context. You always alter what you play according to the context. I'm the same guy, so whatever context I'm in, it's still me. I don't really have to analyse it too much at the beginning: it's just an instinct that feels right and it feels right, somehow, to be here in this place, whatever this place is. I said well, let me see how far I can take this and see if it will hold up for me.

Did you start the ball rolling by choosing one song and then trying to build the rest of the album from there?

There's always one tune that's the door in. I think it was "What Will I Tell My Heart." It was that

SANBORN SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring
Wednesday, 17 September 2008 07:43

quality that I heard in Hank Crawford, who was really the guy who inspired me to play the saxophone. It was that quality that he had of really singing through his horn and of not being afraid to use space: of just letting that space go by and controlling the momentum and the dynamic of the song. Very early on I learned from him, even though I couldn't put it into words, the idea that space is important and it's how you manipulate the space that's really what it is that you're doing.

Like Miles Davis?

Exactly. So all the people I really gravitated to, they were practitioners of that philosophy. So Hank was the first. Hank was my door in.

Was he one of your earliest influences?

Absolutely. He was the first. Hank and 'Fathead' Newman, who was also in the Ray Charles band. Those were the guys and that was the music that pulled me in. I said wow, I want to do this.

There's a very strong Ray Charles influence on the album and of course Ray Charles was a sax player himself.

Oh absolutely! He was amazing saxophone player. He could just overpower whatever limitations he had technically: he was such a powerful musician. He was just amazing and Ray told me once that he was always intimidated by Hank and 'Fathead.' That was so odd to hear that coming from him.

Why did you choose to do the Percy Mayfield song 'Send Me Someone To Love'?

I always loved that tune. I loved the way Ray did that song. Actually Percy was on Ray's label, Tangerine, and Percy was a guy that just told these great stories. I mean how more direct can

SANBORN SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 07:43

you get than please send me someone to love? That just cuts through all the bullshit and gets right to the point. And that was always Percy's thing.

You've got three vocalists singing on the album - Sam Moore, Eric Clapton and Joss Stone. How did Joss get to participate?

Well, Joss to me is like an old soul. She has so much wisdom and maturity in her voice. It just seems so obvious to me. You know it's funny as things start to come together, these ideas or people come into your line of sight and it's like yeah, of course, it couldn't be anybody else. Just like with Sam Moore and Eric (Clapton). It was so obvious to me. It's like casting in a way.

Did you pick the song first and think who shall I get to sing it?

Well, that's hard to say.

Is it a bit like the chicken and the egg situation then?

Yeah, I think a little bit. It was a case of I really dig that tune....but then there was also a thought: who is somebody that understands where this shit is at? So if it hadn't been that tune it would have been something else that would have been inappropriate to the situation. Fortunately, it worked out, with the idea for the tune and who the person was to sing it.

You mentioned Eric Clapton. Of course, you've had a working relationship with him for some years now...

For a while now, which I am very grateful for. What can I say about him? He may not be the God, but he certainly is a God.

Phil Ramone produced the album. You and he also worked together many years before...

We go way back. He produced my second album.

What do you like about him as a producer?

Well, he knows his music for a start. Phil was really there from the beginning of modern recording, along with Tom Dowd and people like that. He understands musicians. Phil is not only a brilliant engineer, but he is also a great musician. He was a child prodigy violinist and he knows music. He was also Quincy Jones's roommate. So he knew Quincy and he started everything. Phil understands...and this may seem like a simple obvious thing...but he understands where to put the microphones and he understands how to make a live record and how to get the right sound out of the instruments. He also knows how to create an atmosphere in the studio that's conducive to spontaneous performance - certainly he seemed like an obvious choice because Phil understood the music and the history and the knowledge of where this music came from. And also he understood the technology, because he's right up-to-date. So he understood how to realise it.

Who did the arrangements on the album?

Gil Goldstein. They were based on Hank Crawford's arrangements - three of the songs - and one of them ('St. Louis Blues') was based on a Gil Evans arrangement. Two of them were based around Quincy Jones arrangements.

How do you approach a song like 'Basin Street Blues,' which belongs to another era and is so well-established in people's minds?

Well, Gil and I have a good relationship. We talked a lot about the music and we worked on the arrangements together. I can't take credit for that. They are really Gil's arrangements. They evolved out of a process of he and I working together. That's actually one of my favourites on the record because I just think he did an amazing job of updating that song in a way that kept the essence of the spirit of what that song's about.

Did you do that live in the studio?

Yes. It's all live in the studio.

On your last three or four albums you've gone back to play in an all-acoustic, live setting haven't you?

Yeah, just because I felt more connected to that process. What I wanted to get was not necessarily perfection but the idea of it and the arc and drama of it.

Tell me about the guitarist Derek Trucks who appears on 'Brother Ray'?

What an extraordinary musician he is. He's got such a great soul, you know, and he commits himself to the song. You don't ever get the feeling that he is anything less than 100 percent engaged in what he's doing. I find him extraordinary. I sat in with the Allman Brothers when they were in New York last year and just got a chance to play with him. You watch him play and he's deep into the music - you know, no distractions. He's just into it and totally fucking focused. And what he does and what comes out is so powerful and so connected to the moment. That's what you want.

You originally recorded 'Brother Ray' for your 1999 album 'Inside.' Why did you choose to revisit that song?

It fit really well with what this record was about. I wanted to have Derek on the record and I thought this would be a good song to revisit and do it a different way in this context, which is where I kind of always heard the song. I did it very differently with Marcus (Miller). It's Marcus's song but this is kind of always how I heard it - a little more earthy.

Label-wise, you've recently moved from Verve to Decca. What was the reason behind that?

Good question, which I don't really know the answer to. My contract with Verve was up and they seemed to be going in another direction that I wasn't going in. Chris Roberts from Decca made an offer. I like Chris a lot: he's passionate about music and he pretty much came to me and said whatever you decide to do, as long as you're committed to doing it I'll back you up. You can't ask more than that. So I was like well, okay, I couldn't put it better myself.

So did they give you carte blanche to do what you want?

Well, yeah, in a way.

Did you have restrictions imposed only by other record companies then?

No. I've been very lucky: right from the beginning I've always had relationships with whatever record company I've been with that allowed me to do pretty much whatever I want. Other people always have opinions and I always listen to them and if they seem valid to me and if they seem to be something that's helpful, I'll certainly take it under consideration. For better or for worse, the records I've done are the records I wanted to do. And as I look back there are some I'd say well, that doesn't really hold up very well...

Are there any records you wished you hadn't made?

No, I can't say that but there are some records...I mean look, every record I've done there are tunes that I think have been more successful and by successful I mean where I actually achieved what I set out to do. And there are other songs where they didn't really become what I originally envisioned. And I can only think of an example where what ended up coming out was exactly what I had intended. It was a tune called 'Snakes' from 'Upfront.' That's exactly how I meant it to sound and exactly how I wanted it to flow. I couldn't have done it better. That was exactly what I intended. Go beyond that, I don't really care what anybody else thought about it - as long as I can do what I set out to do. There are other tunes where they became something

SANBORN SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 07:43

else that's not really what I intended. I can't make an objective judgment about a subjective fact. That's the only way I can evaluate any of my stuff.

Looking back over your career, what records are you most proud of?

I should say this one, right? (laughs) I like 'Another Hand,' I like that record.

That had Bill Frisell on it.

Yeah, Bill Frisell. After that, I like a good portion of 'Upfront.' I like a good portion of 'Closer' and 'Time Again.'

I love your version on there of the old Mel Tormé tune 'Coming Home Baby.'

Oh, that was Herbie Mann. That was the first time I heard it. Did Mel Tormé do that song?

Yeah, he had a hit with it in 1962.

Really? No kidding!

There's a great groove to that tune.

I always liked that and I tried to get that same vibe on it. I also liked 'Senor Blues' on 'Closer.' Those are tunes where I did what I set out to do. 'Coming Home Baby' is kind of like that too. That's what I meant to do.

I first became aware of you as a saxophone player when I bought the David Bowie record 'Young Americans' in 1975. What was it like working with Bowie?

I enjoyed working with Bowie. I really learned about presentation, 'cos there was as much theatre and thought about the performance as there was about the music and he didn't skimp on either one of those. It was full on. Thinking about my experience with him and a lot of people that I worked with I was just really impressed with how hard they all worked and how committed they were to what they were doing. Not that it should be any different but these people are hard workers. Like Stevie Wonder. Every day at the sound check he would have a new song. Every fucking day he had a new song. And Bowie was always involved with changing and writing stuff.

You went on tour with Bowie as well?

I was on tour with Bowie, yeah. I went on tour when he was touring the States behind the 'Diamond Dogs' record. So we did that one. It was a huge set, a giant set. I forget who designed the set but Jules Fisher did the lighting. It was a big production. The next time I went on tour was behind 'Young Americans.' There was no set. There was nothing on stage but just a big ramp, but it was all white and the music was completely different. We did that album in Philadelphia, at Philadelphia International - Gamble & Huff's studio.

Sigma Sound?

Sigma Sound, yeah. The band was Andy Newmark on drums, Willie Weeks on bass and Carlos Alomar on rhythm guitar, with Mike Garson on piano. And he (Bowie) basically said to me, 'you're like the lead guitar so you play the fills and play the solos.' So I did that function and was all over that record. I think that's where I got a lot of exposure - certainly in the pop world. He was very generous with me and I'm grateful for that. It was funny because at the same time I was working with him, I was working with (arranger) Gil Evans.

Quite a contrast of styles then.

SANBORN SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 07:43

Yeah, but not really, because it was all great music and it was all about the sound - the textures and the colours. One of my memories from that time was I played with Bowie at Madison Square Garden and I got on a plane that night - an overnight flight to Italy - and then got on a smaller plane to Perugia and played the next night with Gil Evans. So that was kind of what my life was, doing both of those things, and to me it was all great because I was doing so many interesting things.

Had you contemplated doing a solo career at that point?

Not really - and then it just seemed to be, well, I want to have a little more control over the context of what I play. And that's what it was for me: it was just a matter of well, I just want to set the agenda a little bit. I was doing okay as a sideman and I was making a living doing it. I wasn't really in the recording studios at all. The only people I recorded with were people that I was on the road with.

You recorded with James Brown in the early '70s. What was that experience like?

The time I spent with him in the studio wasn't very much but he was very cordial. I got into that situation because of David Matthews, who was his arranger at that time.

Were you a fan of Maceo Parker, who played with James?

A huge fan of Maceo Parker - and still am! He's an extraordinary musician.

What's been the highlight of your career?

Today (laughs). I don't know. I'll let you know when it happens (laughs). I mean I've had great moments but you know it's hard for me to single out one. What I just recounted to you was a great memory. Another one is when (saxophonist) Benny Carter was getting a lifetime achievement award from the Grammys. He asked me to come play with him. So it was he and I

SANBORN SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 07:43

plus a bass player named Major Holly and Louis Bellson on drums. We played 'Just Friends.' That was a great moment. I also had a television show back in the early '90s called Night Music and I got to have different people on it, like my heroes. I got Hank Crawford on that show, David 'Fathead' Newman, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins and I got a chance to play with all these people. That was great, I really enjoyed that.

This is probably a difficult question to answer but who is the greatest musician you've ever played with?

I don't rate people like that - this is the best or this is the second-best. They all have great qualities. I played with many great musicians - Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, David Bowie, Stevie Wonder, Gil Evans and Joni Mitchell. Everybody has greatness and even people whose names are not as well known as these, are great.

Recently, I was surprised find you appear on Guru's new 'Jazzmatazz' record.

Yeah I did that.

What was that experience like?

It was fun. They asked me to do that and they sent me the track and I said okay, that's interesting I'll do that. I also played on a record by a group called Ween.

Is your listening taste quite eclectic then?

Yes, very eclectic. The first thing that gets me is the sound. And then the content later - the genre means nothing to me. It's all about the sound of the record.

SANBORN SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 07:43

What was the first record you ever bought?

The first record I ever bought? Gosh! At my age, that's going back a long way (laughs). Well, the first record I remember buying was 'Honky Tonk' by Bill Doggett. But I also remember I was in what they call in America a 5 and 10 cents store, called Woolworths, and I bought an album called 'Rock and Roll,' and it was older rhythm and blues groups like The Orioles, and there was a group - I don't remember their name - but they were singing a song called 'Cherry Pie.' And I thought, oh that's great. I also remember buying Fats Domino records.

Were you drawn to R&B?

Yes I think I was, because that was kind of new, at least to me. My parents had a lot of records in the house: Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, so I heard that music from when I was a little kid. The first records I remember buying were those records. I also remember buying a Jimmy Dorsey record called 'So Rare.' So I ended up buying saxophone players and then records by Little Richard and Chuck Berry - they were great records.

You started out in the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, didn't you?

That was my first professional show business gig.

How was that as an experience?

It was great. Paul was very generous to me. He gave me a lot of space to play. What was great about that band was that they had a lot of jazz musicians - actually, the drummer got me the gig, Philip Wilson, who was an old buddy of mine from St. Louis. In '67 I was out in San Francisco visiting friends and I ran into him on the street and he said I'm playing down at the Fillmore Ballroom with Butterfield - why don't you come down. I went down there, heard them and met the guys and then went down to LA. I was hanging around the studio and they asked me to play on the record and after that I joined the band. I conned my way into the band.

SANBORN SPEAKS!

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 07:43

You played at Woodstock with them didn't you?

Yeah, I was at Woodstock.

How was that?

It was great but at that time I certainly didn't think of it as in any way historic - it was just another gig.

(As told to Charles Waring)

'Here & Now' is out now on Decca.