

INDIE LIFE

BRIAN LANDRUS

SEIZING THE RAW MATERIAL

By Phillip Lutz
Photo by Vince Segalla



For nearly 20 years, Brian Landrus wrote all his music seated at the piano with Sammy, his black cat, nestled in his lap. So it was only natural that when Landrus and a mortally ill Sammy got together for what would be their final writing session, on March 21 of last year, the session would yield a tune dedicated to this feline muse.

"I was singing and he was looking at me," Landrus recalled in his Brooklyn home, his normally booming voice reduced to a whisper as he gazed at the piano where the writing sessions took place. "At the end of the song I wrote it like I wanted it to keep going. It just fades out like his life did."

At first glance, Landrus might seem like an imposing presence—he stands 6 feet, 7 inches tall. But according to Esperanza Spalding (one of his current employers), the saxophonist is actually "a warm and open spirit." That is reflected in his approach to the low woodwinds, and his melodic playing has attracted the widespread attention of fellow musicians as well as critics. Landrus landed in the top three slots in the Rising Star–Baritone Saxophone category of the DownBeat Critics Poll for both 2013 and 2012.

"I don't have the desire to play squeaks and squawks," he said. "That's not where my heart is at. That's not what I hear. I want to be the guy who, when they hear bass saxophone, they say, 'Isn't that beautiful?'"

Landrus' penchant for beauty is matched by a cat-like capacity for seizing the raw material of life and shaping it to maximum advantage—even material as painful as the loss of a beloved writing partner. "Sammy," the requiem created on that March day, has surfaced as the second track—and one of the most powerful—on Landrus' new album, *Mirage* (BlueLand).

Such resourcefulness is, of course, an asset for anyone—let alone an independent musician trying to produce an album—and *Mirage* is brimming with evidence of it. Nearly every one of the dozen pieces on the album connects Landrus' life directly to his art, first and foremost the title tune, a seductive work written amid tears at the end of what proved to be an illusory love affair.

"When things went down," Landrus said, "it wasn't there. It's the mirage we live in."

Landrus is hardly unique in drawing on personal experience. But Ryan Truesdell, the conductor on and co-producer of *Mirage*, noted that in the decade since he and Landrus attended the New England Conservatory together, the saxophonist has consistently mined the life-art connection to profound effect.

"He uses the music as a vehicle for something deeper," Truesdell said.

Music has paved the way for Landrus' personal development since his days growing up in free-wheeling Reno, Nev., where he transformed him-

self from a boombox-toting street brawler to a sax-wielding habitué of the local clubs and casinos. Landrus, 34, said the transformation started at age 12 after he heard a Charlie Parker record, picked up an alto sax and saw a life in music stretching out before him.

"I started playing," he said, "and everything changed."

By the age of 14, he was networking with local musicians. By 16, he was subbing for his teacher, Rico Mordenti, in backup bands for r&b groups like the Coasters and the Drifters when they played in town. Soon he became the first-call tenor for those bands, performing with them as far west as Sacramento, Calif.—all while under the watchful eye of a bouncer assigned to keep him from straying into areas off-limits to minors.

Through it all, he had only flirted with the baritone sax. Then, at age 18, he landed a full-time casino show that both required him to play the baritone and afforded him the means to buy one. Titled *Work That Skirt*, the show—a jumble of quick costume changes and platforms rising precariously above the Reno Hilton stage—was, he said, "as bad as it sounds." But it provided collateral for a \$6,000 bank loan with which he bought a Keilwerth SX 90 baritone.

The purchase set him on another professional track: instrument dealer. Although the Keilwerth was reliable, Landrus said, he placed it on eBay

after three years of service when he saw the opportunity to upgrade to a 1953 Selmer Super Action. Using the marketing know-how he acquired watching his father run a jewelry store, he found that he could flip instruments for an occasional profit—no minor skill for a musical free agent—and build an impressive private collection along the way.

Standing in his Brooklyn living room, Landrus was surrounded by that collection: 14 axes arrayed in stands on the floor. Among them—all manner of saxes, clarinets and flutes, heavily weighted toward the musical low end—was the '53 Selmer, one of four baritones he has retained among the hundreds of horns he has bought and sold over the years. The collection provides him with a financial cushion.

"It's the only thing I have that's valuable," he said. But, he was quick to point out, its value was far more musical than monetary. While newer instruments might be mechanically superior, he said, vintage ones often have a richer sound, like the 1964 Selmer Series 9 bass clarinet or the 1948 Selmer Super Action baritone once used by a member of the Dorsey Brothers Band. Instruments like these help him play what he hears.

"Number one," he said, "it's about my voice."

Landrus has been honing his voice of late before audiences large and small, moving between world tours with Spalding's Radio Music Society ensemble and club dates with his quintet, Kaleidoscope. That band—Nir Felder on guitar, Frank Carlberg on piano, Lonnie Plaxico on bass and Rudy Royston on drums—appeared in full on *Mirage* with a string quartet that included violinist Mark Feldman.

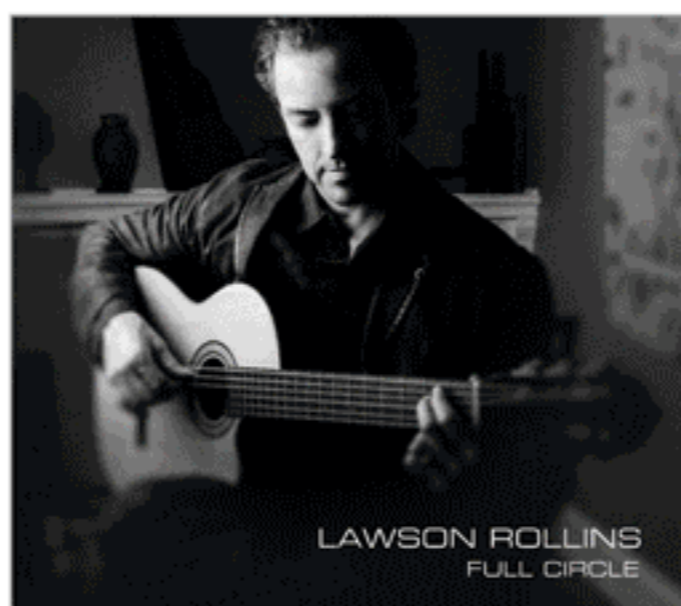
When Landrus is not performing publicly, he can often be found leading student ensembles at the 92nd Street Y or laying down horn parts at home in a small studio carved out of his living room, where he dispatches them digitally to producers who integrate them into their musical settings. All of which helps pay the bills: *Mirage* cost \$30,000 to produce, he said, and he is already thinking about his next album.

Meanwhile, the dedicated craftsman practices his baritone and bass saxes, bass clarinet and alto flute three hours a day. When asked to blow a few random bars on his biggest horns, he reveals range, humor and a highly developed melodic sense—traits that, at the conservatory, helped him win both the coveted Gunther Schuller Medal and the enduring esteem of teachers like saxophonist George Garzone.

"He was pretty much open to anything I had to say," Garzone recalled.

Ironically, Landrus' openness to ideas—and willingness to pursue them—might have delayed the discovery of his musical niche back in the day. But as he moved about his Brooklyn living room, a big man amid big horns, it was clear that he had found that niche. The big horns' comparatively lower profiles, he said, had unlocked opportunities for him to create a wider berth in the marketplace—and to forge an identity more closely aligned with who he is.

"When I'm playing tenor," he said, "there's this legacy that goes so far back. I love it, but that's not what I hear anymore." **DB**



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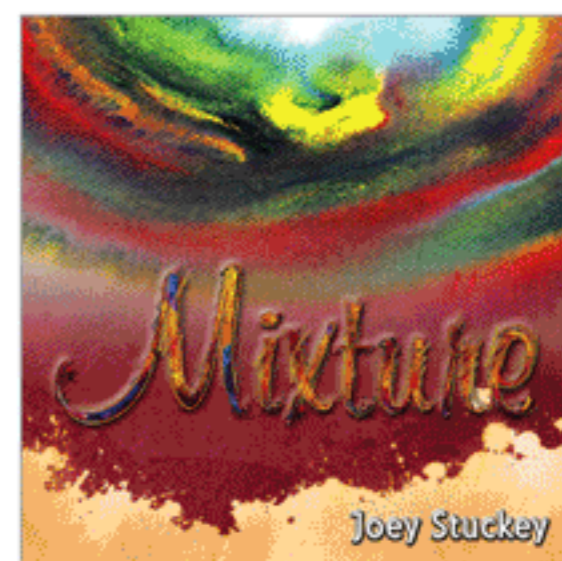
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