

STEVE RAYBINE

Changing the soundscape
of smooth jazz with the vibes

By Debra Harner

Steve Raybine describes the last 20 years as “an odyssey”—a “mission to change people’s minds” about an instrument he believes is widely neglected and sadly, under-exposed within the world of smooth jazz: the vibraphone (also known as “vibes”).

In a recent phone call, Raybine (who’s been lauded by top radio promoter Jason Gorov as “the premier vibraphonist in the smooth jazz format”) discussed his determination to shine a brighter spotlight on his instrument. “People like variety,” he said, “but so much of this genre’s landscape is dominated by saxophone, guitar and keyboard. That begs the question: ‘Why not something different?’”

Fans who’ve heard the seamless blend of jazz, Latin, R&B, funk and pop sounds on Raybine’s new CD, *Cool Vibes*, are in agreement. Since its June release, the 15-track album’s first single, “Kiss Me,” has already received significant radio airplay, and the second, “Kickin’ Back,” is also generating a broad buzz. In praising the recording on an independent review of the CD, jazz historian and journalist Scott Yanow wrote, “With all of its variety, *Cool Vibes* has a strong unity and is filled with rhythmic melodies. Its performances are both accessible and creative. The result is an infectious program that is easy to enjoy.”

As with three earlier releases—*Balance Act* (2000), *Bad Kat Karma* (2005), and *In the Driver’s Seat* (2009), all on Raybine’s own label, Bad Kat Records—the latest delivers a mix of original instrumental compositions and a smattering of vocal tracks that are capturing the attention of listeners from across the United States and throughout Europe.

Though he started playing piano in first grade and drums in fourth grade, Raybine’s passion for music came to life when a junior high band director introduced him to mallet percussion. He began with xylophone lessons before moving on to the more complex vibraphone. “Musicians always ask each other: ‘Did you pick your instrument or did your instrument pick you?’ In my case, it was definitely the latter. The vibraphone just called to me,” he said.

The Wisconsin native credited a host of other experiences for influencing his performance and composing styles over a long career: playing in bands at Eastman School of Music, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Iowa; his classical training and performances with the Omaha Symphony; studies with jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton; plus hours listening to vibes master Milt Jackson and performing the music of Dave Brubeck.

After a stint as a professional musician in Los Angeles, Raybine earned a doctor of musical arts degree and became an instructor and coordinator of jazz studies and percussion at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. He remained a full-time educator until the mid-1990s, when trumpeter Rick Braun (an Eastman classmate and fellow member in the 1970s progressive jazz group Auracle) came through town on a concert tour. “We were talking about our careers, and Rick suggested, ‘Why don’t you try to do with



vibes what I’ve done with the trumpet?’ That ignited something in me,” Raybine explained.

Launching his first recording project while juggling a demanding teaching schedule and busy family life with two young sons was an enormous challenge. “The only part of the day I could possibly squeeze in any time for composing was between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m.,” he admitted.

While carving out his niche as a solo artist, Raybine opened a home studio and now coaches 40 to 50 students per week in classical and jazz piano, drums, vibraphone, songwriting, contemporary pop piano-vocal styling and jazz improvisation. The versatile multi-instrumentalist also guests as a clinician at high schools and colleges, supported by endorsements from Ludwig Drums (maker of Musser vibraphones) and Mike Balter Mallets.

“It’s been a journey of a million baby steps,” he observed, “but I’m the poster boy for persistence!” That’s a spot-on description, because another of Raybine’s many endeavors is Music 4 Life, LLC, a company working with retailer J.W. Pepper & Son to market music education posters with motivational phrases, such as “Preparation Requires Prior Planning,” “Attitude Is Everything,” and “When You Memorize Music, You Mesmerize the Audience.”

Of those 70-plus posters, one stands out as a perfect summation of Raybine’s lifelong approach as a teacher, motivator and musician on a mission: “When You Inspire, You Light The Fire.”

For more information on Raybine, who is now booking gigs for 2017, visit www.steveraybine.com.