

Hendrik Meurkens - Biography

Virtuoso instrumentalist and composer Hendrik Meurkens was born August 6, 1957 in Hamburg, Germany. As a boy, his Dutch father and German mother had jazz and Brazilian records in their collection. "I heard the music and that was the start of it," he remembers. He began with piano lessons, and played drums in the basement with friends. But finally, at sixteen, he got serious, devoting himself to the vibraphone, because, "the vibes seemed to be the best marriage between the piano and drums."

Adopting a two-mallet approach, a la Lionel Hampton and Milt Jackson, Meurkens chose to teach himself because "I had to discover it myself and what I found was that I came to see the vibraphone as a horn, a saxophone with mallets."

But it was hearing Toots Thielemans play the harmonica, when he was nineteen, that totally changed his musical life. He was so moved by Toots and his sound that he bought his own chromatic harmonica, the next day.

Entirely self-taught on this difficult-to-master instrument, the multi-talented Meurkens has made it his primary focus. "Playing jazz harmonica is very difficult," Meurkens notes. "It's hard to connect all the notes smoothly. But it's a wonderfully expressive instrument, as well. And like the saxophone, you can work with the tone and develop your own sound."

In search of his own musical voice, Meurkens came to America in 1977, to attend the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he studied for three years. A vibes major at the time, Meurkens secretly played his harmonica whenever possible. Immersing himself in the music of his mentor, Charlie Parker, he transcribed Bird's solos and mastered them on the harmonica. And he got to jam with his fellow Berklee students, who encouraged him to actively pursue a career on the chromatic harmonica.

In addition to the Jazz masters, Brazilian music was also particularly influential, and had been since it first heard it as a teenager. To immerse himself in the music, he moved to Brazil in 1982 at the invitation of Maurício Einhorn, the great Brazilian harmonica player and composer of several classics of bossa nova. Meurkens took an apartment in Rio and soon began a regular Monday gig at the popular Bar 21.

In Brazilian music, he found a beauty and simplicity that touched a profound chord. "I've always been attracted to music that focuses on melody and harmonic beauty. That could be Bach, of course, but for me, the perfect music is Brazilian because of its sympathetic emotional context."

Brazilian trumpeter Claudio Roditi observes, "Hendrik's understanding of the Brazilian music vocabulary is absolute...His music feels like the work of a native Brazilian composer. Hendrik Meurkens is one of those rare musicians who makes you listen to his instrument - the harmonica - as a virtuoso instrument."

After his Brazilian sabbatical, he returned to his native Germany and became a pivotal force in the German studio and jazz scene, both playing, and composing. With his unique voice on both the chromatic harmonica and vibraphone, he quickly became an important musician on the European scene.

He started his own quartet, which became his preferred performance format. In 1983, he won the first prize of the German Phono Academy for Jazz. Meurkens also recorded with the Danish Radio Orchestra and various other European Radio Big Bands, plus he toured the continent extensively with his own ensembles as well as with visiting legends Harry Sweets Edison and Buddy Tate. In 1989, he returned to Brazil to record his first album as a leader, SAMBA IMPORTADO, which was released internationally in 1990.

A bit of serendipity served as the catalyst for his next recording, and his move to the US. In 1990, his wife was studying at University of California at Berkeley and when he came to see her, he ended up in a Bay area record store. Discovering that Concord Records was nearby via the BART public transport system, he took his first album to their office and presented it to label founder Carl Jefferson. Jefferson decided to sign Hendrik Meurkens to the label and got him a working visa. By 1992, this virtuoso was finally in New York, the Jazz mecca.

Hendrik Meurkens' six Concord recordings successfully introduced him to the global audience and established him as the first major new voice on the harmonica since Toots Thielemans.

In 1991, Concord released his next CD, SAMBAHIA, featuring Paquito D'Rivera and Claudio Roditi, on their Picante label. As the European audience for his music continued to grow, Meurkens did numerous tours of the continent, including major Jazz festivals and radio broadcasts, including a special duo concert with Toots Thielemans broadcast live on German radio.

With a burgeoning American interest in his music, he finally moved to New York in 1992 and has been a resident ever since. That year he broke through to the American market with his second Concord CD, CLEAR OF CLOUDS. The CD was embraced by jazz radio and stayed in the Top Five on the American Jazz charts for most of that winter.

Not surprisingly, Meurkens is quick to explain his love for New York: "Paquito calls New York, *the jungle*, but musically, there's New York, and there's the rest of the world," he believes. In addition to working and jamming, Meurkens found himself going out to clubs and just listening. "The level of musicianship in New York is staggering. It spoils you because after awhile, you just can't live anyplace else."

Appropriately, in 1993, he recorded A VIEW FROM MANHATTAN. The response to his first truly American recording was overwhelming positive, with rave reviews and strong airplay. The album reached #3 on the Jazz radio charts, signaling that Meurkens' move to the States was indeed a welcomed one.

Not surprisingly, Meurkens saw additional evidence that he and his harmonica were being taken seriously when he appearing at noted Jazz clubs, like the Blue Note, and the Festival circuit, including the JVC Jazz Festival.

He also became an in-demand featured guest artist, as well, recording with guitarist Charlie Byrd live at the 26th Fujitsu-Concord Jazz Festival, and in the studio with bossa nova legend, the pianist Manfredo Fest, on COMEÇAR DE NOVO. In a 1994 Tribute to Dizzy Gillespie at New York City's Town Hall, he performed with Lionel Hampton, Wallace Roney, and members of Gillespie's last band, in May of 1994.

The Jazz listening public also recognized Meurkens' incredible talent, listing him with Toots Thielemans as one of the top harmonica players in the world (Jazziz Readers' Poll - May 1994 issue). The critics concurred and his November 1994 release, SLIDIN', found its way onto Jazziz magazine's list of Critics' Picks for the Best Recordings of 1994 (March 1995 issue).

In addition to performing and recording, Hendrik Meurkens continues to write original music. "A great composition means everything to me and I have the deepest respect for the great composers such as Bach, Jobim or Ellington," he explains. "I compose from inspiration but it takes time, because I have a very discriminating quality filter. I feel I have to live up to the standard that the masters set. Consequently, I probably write less than most players, but that works better for me because I have to be able to live with what I write. I truly believe in a good tune. If I don't get it right it stays in the drawer."

Although his compositions were always part of his recordings, Meurkens' first major composing credit was in 1994, when he was commissioned to write for the Hollywood motion picture "Dolores Claiborne", starring Kathy Bates and Jennifer Jason Leigh. The composition, titled, "Night in the Afternoon", can be heard on 1995 Picante release, OCTOBER COLORS, featuring his SambaJazz Quartet. Meurkens also played the song on screen in the movie.

On POEMA BRASILEIRA, which Picante released in August 1996, Meurkens surrounds himself with an all-star cast of Brazilian friends including Ivan Lins, today's premier Brazilian composer. Friend and famed guitarist Romero Lubambo and master drummer Portinho are also among the cast of sixteen stellar musicians joining the multifarious Meurkens on one of his most impressive and memorable recordings.

As the 20th Century drew to a close, Hendrik Meurkens continued to be a busy man, recording another eight CDs in just three years: QUIET MOMENTS (Evidence Music, Inc.), DIG THIS SAMBA! (with Manfredo Fest - Candid Productions, Ltd.), IN A SENTIMENTAL MOOD (Challenge/A-Records), with the New York SambaJazz All-Stars; NEW YORK NIGHTS (Challenge/A-Records), with drummer Jimmy Cobb, WHEN LIGHTS ARE LOWE (Acoustic Music Records), MUNDELL's MOODS (Nagel-Heyer Records), with guitar legend Mundell Lowe, BURNIN' (Acoustic Music Records) with Herb Ellis, and ENCONTROS (Malandro Records) with Nilson Matta.

Firmly establishing as a respected musical voice Hendrik Meurkens has played and recorded with the best musicians on the planet.

Like Ivan Lins. "Ivan is not only a great musician and wonderful person, but playing with him makes me sound good. His voice has so much beauty that it's really a blessing to play with him. Playing with Ivan and so many other Brazilians has given me the opportunity to pull that kind of beauty from my instruments as well. "

And Jimmy Cobb. "I've done four or five tours with Jimmy and it's an honor to play with a man who's made such an important contribution to Jazz history. Although he's past seventy, Jimmy is in great shape and plays with the energy and enthusiasm of a much younger man. He still kills every night."

His association with Paquito D’Rivera is more personal. “Paquito is like a brother. We have the same love for America and New York, and we’re both Brazilian music lovers. Even though we don’t get to play that much together, we have a very strong bond. He’s a very inspiring person, with an incredibly positive attitude.”

Playing with veterans Charlie Byrd and Herbie Mann also proved inspirational. “The older cats,” he explains, “they are truly survivors. They have developed the attitude necessary to survive. As musicians, whatever their problems, whatever is happening on the road, the old guys are troopers, they just let the hours pass and do their jobs.”

“They’re also great communicators. Both Charlie Byrd and Herbie Mann reach out to an audience and make them a part of the experience. That’s been a great lesson for me.”

In the new millennium, Hendrik Meurkens has continued to share his singular musical virtuosity. He toured Europe with an all-star Quartet that included Jimmy Cobb, Ray Drummond and Dado Moroni, as well another group with Cobb and upcoming saxophone giant Eric Alexander. And he’s recorded as a soloist with Astud Gilberto and on a session Phil Ramone produced for Olivia Newton-John. He’s also played everywhere from the Cork International Jazz Festival in Ireland to the first International Jazz and Harmonica Summit in Minneapolis, Minnesota. and the World Harmonica Festival in Trossingen, Germany.

His current project, **Amazon River**, is the culmination of his lifelong love of Brazilian music. Although he has recorded Brazilian music many times, this is his first true concept recording, wherein Meurkens focuses on all aspects of the Brazilian sound, from samba to chorinho, supported by both small group and strings.

During a tour of Germany and Finland with Oscar Castro-Neves, Meurkens began putting the pieces together. It started as a Brazilian Quartet project with Helio Alves, Nilson Matta and Duduka da Fonseca but with Oscar as co-producer, they began recording tracks with additional musicians as well, including Dori Caymmi and Paquito D’Rivera.

Meurkens believes that “**Amazon River** is the ultimate statement about me and my music. It presents the whole picture, from Brazilian influenced Jazz to more traditional music. I feel it’s my best work, with so much variation included within it. My goal was to make the most beautiful album possible and I know that we did.”

“Music is not always meant to make a political statement. Music is just music. When a bird sings, he doesn’t want to change the world. I feel my obligation is to create something of real beauty. There’s no greater statement than that.”

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