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# THE

# RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

Jazz violinist and composer **Zach Brock** has traveled a sometimes weird, always winding path. And he wouldn't change a thing

I first heard Zach Brock on a Friday night at an upscale Chicago pizza restaurant. He was playing a gig with frequent partner and bassist Matt Ulery. Watching the jazz violinist play was as captivating as listening to him. I sensed a perfect consonance as notes flowed from his brain to his bow. Every action and reaction to Ulery was smooth, like a fine, single-malt, aged whiskey—which happens to be Brock's drink of choice before a performance. "I never drink wine before I play," he says after the show. "But a sip of whiskey works. It's the Kentucky in me."

I meet Brock the next morning for our interview, in a downscale Chicago coffee shop. I ask how it feels to be one of the world's leading indie-jazz violinists, but he dodges the question and races into his life story, often glancing at his watch and promising, "I can finish this story in five minutes."

Obviously, his drink of choice in the morning is coffee. Lots of coffee.

"I love coffee," he says. "My mom loves coffee. My dad loves coffee. We have a real coffee thing in my family."

That helps to explain why he's named his band the Coffee Achievers.

In the end, it takes Brock three hours to tell his story, although the time passes quickly. He organizes his professional journey as a trilogy, dividing his 33 years into three neat decades. Then there's his

impassioned physicality and striking preppie good looks, giving him a boyish charm that's just plain enjoyable to watch as he talks. And, of course, he tells a gripping tale—a lot like a roller-coaster ride.

His life history leads up high peaks that dive into deep valleys before taking an unexpected turn.

What's amazing is that Brock really gets how these highs and lows bring profound depth to his music—duly noted by the critics. His band's three independently released CDs, a performance on the soundtrack for the documentary film *Black Gold*, an international debut at the 2006 Tudo e Jazz Festival in Ouro Preto, Brazil, and a slew of other noteworthy accomplishments have brought praise from the best. Acclaimed trumpeter, educator, arranger, and composer Orbert Davis describes Brock as ". . . not just a violinist who plays jazz, but a jazz musician who happens to play the violin."

In announcing his performance, the radio show *Crossing Borders* described him this way: "A critically acclaimed young violinist and composer who favors juxtaposing extremes, Zach Brock draws upon the oldest traditions of his instrument while also brilliantly incorporating musical influences of artists as diverse as John Coltrane and Jimi Hendrix."

It's no wonder that Brock loves his current path, especially a detour that last October took him to Poland, Germany, and Austria. That's when Brock and a documentary film crew, headed by director Erin Harper, began the movie *Passion*. Set for a fall 2008 release, the film traces the life of little-known Polish jazz violinist and composer Zbigniew Seifert, who died at the early age of 32, but whose playing has continued to touch Brock and others. During the filming, Brock interviewed musicians, family, and friends who knew Seifert and he will, of course, be playing Seifert's arrangements on the film's soundtrack.

By Donna Shryer

MARTA IGNATOWICZ



Brock's on a great path now, but it hasn't always been quite so smooth, and at times it's gotten downright scary.

In a way, his professional path began at birth. Brock grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, with two musical parents. His mom is a classically trained singer and voice teacher, with a particular interest in Baroque and Renaissance music. His dad sings, plays guitar, blows a mean trumpet, and leans more toward folk music. Now throw in a little bluegrass, because, after all, Zach did grow up in bluegrass country. An only child, he took up violin around age four and went along for the ride, performing locally with mom and dad as a family band.

It was definitely a musical path, but no jazz . . . not yet.

The family-band experience did, however, give Brock his first foray into improvisation, which would eventually bubble to the top as an extraordinary talent. This early introduction, Brock feels, helped him leap from classical violin to jazz. "For a lot of classical violinists, there's this huge fear of improvisation. I don't know where that comes from—maybe a sense that what you're playing is not validated . . . because it's not written down. To step into playing stuff coming from your imagination . . . expressing something internal, something personal . . . that's something classical musicians struggle with.

"I struggle with it, too, just not as much as other musicians."

During his predictably troublesome teen years, Brock's path dove into one of those valleys. He still played some violin, but not much. His passion was guitar. "The thing that really changed everything for me, around when I was 13, was Jimi Hendrix," he says, remembering the impact of the 1960s rock-guitar god. "I freaked out over Jimi Hendrix. To this day, he's a touchstone for my inspiration. Whenever I step back and think, 'OK, what am I really all about?' I always come back to Hendrix."

This was also when Brock became a skateboarding fanatic. "My dream was to be a professional skateboarder," he recalls. "It reached a point where I would skate until I couldn't move. I would skate for six hours, until I was sore and sweaty and bruised and bloody and then go back for more."

Fortunately, between indy grabs and railstands on the skateboard, Brock got his first jazz-violin records by the legendary Stéphane Grappelli and Stuff Smith. But it was the colossal jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins, or rather a Rollins record jacket, that took Brock's roller coaster back up to a glorious peak. "Seeing Sonny's photo on the jacket is a vivid memory," he says. "This picture was

from the early '60s, after Sonny got cleaned up and started lifting weights. He had on this amazing houndstooth sport coat with a really cool shirt and tie. But the thing that made the biggest impression on me is that he had a full-on Mohawk. That blew my mind. To me, all of a sudden, I saw that jazz music is and always will be rebel music.

"I could take a stand against things that were wrong in society, be socially conscious, and put all this into my music."

So Brock put away his skateboard, abandoned the punk-rock persona, and began studying jazz. He learned to transcribe and to understand what was going on harmonically.

He was—finally—on a path headed for jazz.



WIRED FOR SUCCESS: Zach Brock.

With his professional aspirations set, Brock went off to college. First stop: Oberlin Conservatory, but just for a few days. Then, a screeching halt and speedy path adjustment took him to Northwestern University. "There was something in the back of my mind that told me to go somewhere where I could study classical violin, but also be in an environment where I could study jazz," he explains. "I needed to be in a city. So, at the last minute, I headed for Northwestern [in Chicago]. That's where I met Myron Kartman, the man who would be my teacher—the greatest teacher I will ever have."

Brock's fans around the world owe Kartman a big thanks. Without Kartman's presence, Brock would have given up violin long ago. Why? Two months into his sophomore year at Northwestern, Brock was crushed by

a car. "It was October 30, 1993. Hit and run. I was on a bicycle," he recalls. "My femur came out the side of my pants, my eye socket was broken, my kneecap was smashed into eight pieces, my tibia and fibula were bent.

"This [nearby] man heard the crash from inside his house. He called an ambulance and saved my life."

Police eventually arrested the hit-and-run driver, but Brock's path spiraled downward. Bed-bound for six months, he dropped out of school and moved back to Kentucky. It took years of physical therapy and multiple surgeries before he could walk without serious pain.

"I played violin as soon as I could," Brock says. "Somehow, nothing happened to my back or hands, so at points during my recovery, sitting in a chair and playing was all I could do. Everything else was pain and misery. I was crippled with depression. Even when I got better physically, I got sicker and sicker mentally. I became a puny, fragile, 130-pound mess.

"But, I could still play violin."

At one point, Brock tried going back to school, but it was too hard to navigate the campus and he was too depressed to focus. He dropped out again. "I didn't want to go home," Brock explains. "My parents were frustrated and scared for me, and I was really messed up. All we did was fight. So I moved into an apartment near the Northwestern campus. Myron Kartman told me he'd still give me lessons anytime I could show up. [Kartman] taught me for three years without taking a cent. It's not like I was the darling of the studio.

"He's just that kind of guy."

During this strange period, Brock met Erin Harper, director of *Passion*, who back then was getting her bachelor's in theatre arts at Northwestern. The two fell madly, deeply in love and have been together ever since.

Wandering around this part of the path, Brock gets a little teary-eyed, but has no trouble telling it straight. "Even though this whole story really sucks, it was in so many ways the greatest thing that ever happened to me," he says of the accident and his subsequent recovery. "I met the greatest teacher of my life, I met the love of my life, and I learned what I wanted to do with my life. I got to put myself back together from scratch.

"It's a tough way to learn so much, but hey, it worked for me."

The new and improved Brock finally got his degree from Northwestern and dedicated himself to jazz. That's also when he realized that he wasn't the only jazz-violin player in the world and he'd have to make a name for himself. He applied for and received

a Betty Carter Jazz Ahead residency at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. "It was a huge step for me," he says. "My whole life I'd always had this feeling that it was better to be unknown and great than try to affirm myself and possibly come up short."

Coming up anything but short, Brock closed his Jazz Ahead experience a winner, with an even stronger connection to jazz, and two new friends, keyboardist Sam Barsh and bassist Matt Wigton. The trio met in Chicago later that summer, hooked up with local drummer Nori Tanaka (since replaced by Jon Deitemyer), and recorded Brock's debut CD, *Zach Brock and the Coffee Achievers*.

"That's pretty much it," Brock says.

Of course, that's not it. In 2006, Brock relocated from Chicago to Brooklyn. "I relocated because for me, and a lot of people who play jazz music, New York City is a big itch that needs to be scratched," he says. "Another big factor is that most of my jazz heroes live in New York City, and I realized that if I wanted to play with them, I would have to move. My musical relationship with Sam Barsh, the piano player in my band, who lives in New York City, was also a big factor."

These days, Brock's also building his record company, Secret Fort Records, composing, hoping to get more into writing film scores, and planning his next recording session this spring. In addition to his compositions, the new release will likely feature some arrangements by Zbigniew Seifert.

"I think this next record is going to be a very strong statement about who I am," Brock says. "I can't wait to hear it!" □

Learn more about Zach Brock, hear audio files, and watch a film clip from *Passion* by visiting [www.zachbrock.com](http://www.zachbrock.com).

#### WHAT ZACH BROCK PLAYS

Zach Brock plays two violins: one is a 1961 Carl Becker, Sr., which formerly belonged to his teacher, Myron Kartman; the other a 2005 Eric Aceto acoustic five-string, which he played while recording *Live at the Jazz Factory*. His bow is by acclaimed French bowmaker François Lotte (1889–1970). Brock uses and recommends Aceto's pickup. His main amp is an Acoustic Image Chorus. As for electronic effects, Brock says, "I have experimented with all kinds of guitar pedals and effects. My favorites are the Small Stone Phase Pedal, the Dimebag Darrell Wah-Wah, the Line 6 Delay, and the Rat Distortion Pedal. A great all-around pedal board is the Boss ME-50, which I used on *Chemistry*."

—D.S.

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