



## Music is a Mean Mistress: Rik Wright on Performance and Life

By Tyran Grillo

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If you walk past the spectrum of musicians' musicians and improvisational posers, you're sure to end up on the path of guitarist Rik Wright, who for over three decades has been forging a color scheme all his own. By that I mean not only the nominal palette of his magnum opus with flagship band Fundamental Forces, a trilogy that began with 2013's *Blue*, continued with *Red* the following year, and culminated with *Green* the next; but also the figurative gradations of his artistic developments. In each of these, as by them together, Wright has arrived at a wisdom that is as much creative as it is practical. It's only natural that someone of his diverse passions—which range from poetry to active involvement in Pacific whale conservation—should have cobbled together a life that is at once experimental and practical. It was in this framework of understanding that I chatted with Wright about the actual—and yes, fundamental—forces that have moved him through and beyond the subjective borders around notions of the performer and the performed, and the sometimes-mysterious ways in which these interact through the prism of an ephemeral audience.

MJT: Let's start by going backward. Now that you have finished your trilogy of colors, can you talk about where these albums have brought you in your musical thinking that you might not have been before?

RW: I'm actually in a weird place because of all of this. The obvious existential question is: What now? And there is some sense of relief of having done it and done it well. There's always a critic in you, especially if you start dabbling in jazz, but I'm just not that sort of detailed player. I'm more guttural. Part of what keeps me going is knowing I can do better. I want to see how far I can push this before I break. I'm already far past wherever I expected to be with these records.

MJT: Do you have any regrets looking back, or is it all just part of the same cosmic flow?

RW: It's more about hitting the end of the path and saying: What was this? Where was I? The bigger shock for me has come in having to face a certain amount of writing pressure. *Green* is a good example of that. I've always had this backlog of material. As we did the sessions for *Red*, I could plug things in when needed. But for *Green* I ran up against an exhaustion of material, so I had to come up with certain tunes from scratch to get the moods I was looking for. I guess everybody has a different relationship with writing. For me, it's always been a turn-it-on-when-I-need-it kind of thing. I write when I have to, not as a discipline. Those energies are already there, and it's whether I'm paying attention or not.

MJT: On that note of turning on abilities when needed, have you been able to make your entire living as a musician, or do you also have a day job?

RW: I've done both. Before this, I did tech consulting. During that time, I played but didn't release much. That was part of this journey, too. These days it's about 50/50. What I do part-time pays enough so that I can work a little here and there and put gas in the tank. But that's true of most musicians these days, who supplement their income through teaching or other professions. Music is a mean mistress. You have to attend to it every day or some part of it tends to leave you. Somebody told me when I was younger that even when you get to the point where you don't need to exercise your brain so much anymore, music never ceases to be physical. It's a sport.

MJT: I ask this because you do many things with your life, and it sounds to me like music occupies its place but that it fluctuates depending on what's needed, as you say about writing.

RW: It's true. I think everybody's life is like that, whether they want to admit it or not. I've been in Seattle for 20 years now and have been playing professionally since my mid-teens. I see kids all the time who have yet to figure everything out, who still don't know the hard reality of having a family of their own to support. Right now, their life is 90% music, and if that's where you stay, that's sheltered living. Hopefully, the older you get the more you balance out.

MJT: In light of this, here's a compulsory question: What advice would you give to younger musicians? Would it be along the lines of what you've been saying?

RW: Above all, figure out what you're going to do for money, because music's not it. People are going to make music—always have, always will—whether the industry is there to support it or not. There's a spotlight on the 10% that makes it, but what does it mean to make it anyway? If it means you're going to spend the next 20 years of your life on the road 10 months of every year scratching together a enough income to live in a major city where there's enough musicians to do your thing



and hang out just above poverty level, then more power to you. But what you really need is to: a) be ready for that reality, b) do something else that's going to help fund your life and your family's life, or c) find somebody who is willing to at least partially support you. I've managed to make a living, but it's been harder than it needed to be. Making music is great. Dedicating yourself to music is great. I think people who spend their lives surrounded in music, and particularly playing and composing it, have a more balanced view of the world and what's going on in it. They're some of the more centered people you'll find.

MJT: And do you think that's because of the inevitability of meeting people from so many different walks of life and sharing something common and universal with them?



RW: You've probably seen those studies, talking about how musicians by nature learn and operate on multiple levels—rhythm, melody, chord structures—at the same time, which means they learn to look at things not just from *a* perspective but from *multiple* ones.

MJT: So this centeredness of which you speak is more cognitive than social in origin?

RW: Yeah, it's a cognitive thing. I think musicians are relatively likely to see more than one path to a solution. People who speak multiple languages are the same. It's all about wiring. That's why music is so important in schools. It teaches us to multitask, for one thing. Music is so fundamental to the human experience. It's more accessible than any other art form. People who spend their lives in it tend to be very well grounded. Like anything else, however, one can lose perspective by spending too much time in it. I think that's a great place to come to, but you need to understand the workings of the world around it. No one teaches that in music school. Too many graduates come out having no idea about what

the world's going to be like for them. Then there's the creative front. There are those who are just so virtuosic—your Tuck Andress or Stanley Clarkes—who come out and do something so incredible that you can't deny it. That's a rare breed, the one percent. The rest of us have to find our thing. But I would say give yourself time and pay attention to what's unique. And I pretty much did that in the worst way possible. I wouldn't let go of who I wanted to be to listen to who I was for a very long time. Somebody recently posted a bunch of videos of one of my touring bands from college on YouTube. And I'm watching these things thinking: Wow, everything I've developed into my current sound, I was doing it back then and just didn't know it. The whole thing was right there; it just took me 20 years to catch on. It's hard for a lot of musicians to get to that point. There's such a mass of music around your head, influences that you don't hear as much as you could. And that's the hardest part of it, learning to embrace those things that are what you are.

MJT: And how has this fed into your life as a performer?

RW: There's this notion of art versus craft. If I go and play a casual gig of standards, that's craft—something that anybody who comes out of music school can do. There may very well be some individual expression in there, and ideally there is, but it's craft. But as soon as I play my rig and have my voice, it becomes a whole different thing. Even if it's the same music, I'll approach solos and chords differently, and all those things that make me who I am now are the art. And any good artist is, hopefully, a good craftsman. It's not always true the other way around. The thing is, there's no quintessential moment. It doesn't exist. If it exists, then you change it immediately after. When I listen to my own work, I still hear all the mistakes. And it often takes many years for me to listen to a recording and appreciate it.

MJT: And what does it take to appreciate your own work?

RW: Being open-minded enough to get in the same mindset that I'm in when listening to other people's recordings. The greatest example of it would be that whenever any musician plays live, two things are going to happen. One is your time reference is completely different from the audience's. You see everything moving four or five times slower than they do. And the second is that no matter what your perception of what just happened might be, it's not even related to the audience's perception. It took me a long time to get over that second one. The audience has no perception of what I think it's supposed to sound like, and I am just one part of their listening experience. Their experience is as related to what's going on around them as it is to what I'm doing on stage: whether it's in a bar or a concert hall or whether other people are having fun and paying attention or whatever. I have no idea what history or circumstances they are walking in the door with. So there's all this other stuff that's going on in their world that isn't going on in mine as a performer. For me to have an unadulterated listening experience with my own music, I have to get myself in that viewpoint where it's a new piece of music to me, or an experience where I'm able to divorce myself from what I'm doing and hear the music as just a person in the audience.

MJT: Do you think those dynamics are heightened, being that in Fundamental Forces you are playing music that is ostensibly between rock and jazz and therefore not as graspable for the audience?

RW: It depends on the audience. It's a real struggle for this band. And it's why I abandoned similar projects on the path to getting here. One thing is it can be really hard to book. Because we would love for all venues to be The Stone, Jazz Bakery or The Knitting Factory, but that's just not the reality, right? And this band has been easier than others just because we've gotten more notoriety. This ties to the second thing, which is there are people who go to hear a particular type of music and put it on a comparative chart and those who just come to have an experience. I've seen this time and time again. If people come with an open mind, they just love the music for the sake of the creative expression. It's the people who are trying to gauge it against some preconceived notion that are confused by what we do. If you want that virtuosic jazz finesse, you're not going to get that from us. We bring more of a rock attitude there. I kind of feel like the jazz world has painted itself into a corner, and is less open-minded than other genres of music at this point. Rock for thirty years now has been reaching toward jazz—it's a natural music progression—but jazz purists seem to be afraid of anything else. There's this other genre of "classic jazz" now, and the real art of improvisation has moved beyond that classification at this point. And there are so many purists who don't get that.

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