

RAY WRIGHT ONE-LINER REMINISCENCES FROM ALUMNI

Eastman alumni who studied with Ray Wright were encouraged to share a brief recollection of an experience they shared with Ray that was important to them and/or a favorite quote from him. Selected responses were incorporated into a commemorative biography written by Donald Hunsberger, Ray Wright: Life and Time, that was printed and distributed to Ray Wright alumni during Eastman Weekend 2012.

Christopher Azzara (MM '88, PHD '92)

Ray Wright mentored his students with the highest levels of dedication and musicianship—he was and still is an inspiration to me.

Doug Besterman (BA '86)

Just a few years after I graduated, I found myself doing my first important arranging job in NY. The veteran copyist (the supervisor at a venerable old-school copying office) is looking over my scores. "I don't understand it," he says; "you've got almost no experience, and yet your scores read like someone who has been in the business for years. How is that possible?" I tell him, "I studied with Ray Wright." "Oh," he says, "that explains it."

Vince DiMartino (BM '70, MM '78)

Upon reading through less than a chorus of a student arrangement with a few errors, Ray said "OK-pass it in," handing it to the student and remarking, "Fix it and if we have time at the next session, we will try it again". This changed how each of us looked at our work BEFORE we turned it in to him to play. He expected us to be at the highest level performing, writing and interacting with others-just like he was.

Upon watching the public TV show "A Tribute to Alec Wilder", I sent Ray a card awarding him "The Golden Splice Award". He had somehow pieced together a selection (arranged by Ellen Rowe!) that had not gone perfectly on the show. I never did figure out how he did it....

Ray Wright changed lives! He had the knack of taking all of our talents and shortcomings, quietly "rearranging" them, and reforming them into something more presentable. I know that he was a big part of any successes I had over the course of my career because of his talent to do just that with me!

Every concert, arrangement, or meeting with Ray Wright resulted in a change in how you might think about something. He was always helping each person reach their own personal best. His suggestions were always presented in the most positive light, no matter how bad a job you had done! He was a person of great humility and earned the highest respect from every person with whom he had contact. A once-in-a-lifetime experience for all of us lucky to have been a part of his Eastman tenure.

Bill Hammond (BM '76)

Ray Wright generously took time to help me understand and plan a career change from performance to business. In the 70s, this was not a clear cut career plan, but Ray was unique in his skillful guidance.

Matt Harris (MM '85)

I'll never forget Ray taking notes in our arranging class on what the students were talking about!

Also: Ray's infamous "quiet whistle" as he looked over scores only to find a 16th note mistake buried in some inner part. AMAZING!
Scott Healy (BM '82)

"That's not going to sound the way you think it's going to..." (*Without* me telling him how I thought it would sound.)

Manny Mendelson (MM '79)

My very first experience with Ray Wright was also the most profound. It was probably 1976, and I was a student in New York City. Flipping through the pages of the musicians' union newspaper, I noticed an ad for Ray's summer Arranger's Workshop. I called Eastman, and a moment later I found myself talking to Ray Wright. As Ray spoke about the program, calmly laying out the details of what he had created at Eastman, my life changed. Bam. Like that.

Utter, blinding clarity. Thanks to a 5 minute phone call with Rayburn Wright, I had a future. I had a plan. And I had a mentor. Ray changed everything.

Bob Palmieri (MM '54)

When asked what I would be expected to do when auditioning for his band, Ray said "Fit"

Dave Rivello (MM '89)

My two favorite Ray Wright quotes are:

"The guiding line between daring and wrong is very thin, you should always walk that line."

"Books are just the summation of someone else's experiences, have your own experiences."

Also: "Decide by ear, not rules."

Laurence Rosenthal (BM '47, MM '51)

Even though Ray and I were cordially acquainted in our Eastman days, our lives were, to my regret, rarely in the same place and the same time. But in those rare moments when our paths as fellow students intersected, it was impossible not to be struck, charmed, and inspired by his warmth, his enthusiasm, his extraordinary talent, and his sheer love of music in so many of its guises. To know him, to exchange ideas with him, simply to be in his presence, was an unforgettable experience which I deeply treasure.

Kim Scharnberg (BM '82)

Vocalist Teri Koide was singing with the RPO with Ray conducting and she asked me to write an arrangement of the song *Tenderly* for her. I really wanted to write an 8 bar intro to the song with lots of cool and clever re-harmonizing, etc. but Ray's voice came into my head saying, 'no... make it 4 bars...' After the concert I got the score back and in wonderful Ray Wright fashion SLASH- 2 BAR INTRO! That's when the voice came back to me and said, 'write short intros...get to the singer!' It still influences my work to this day...

Maria Schneider (MM '85)

I've never known an individual that exhibited such excellence, perfection, strength, organization and artistry, with such calmness, deftness, lightness, even warmth, humor and kindness, as Ray. He shows us all that excellence and balance can coexist.

Phil Snedecor (BM '85)

My favorite line from Ray—one that has stuck with me all of these years—is this:

“When arranging something, always say something new. Never re-hash what someone else has done or what the composer has already said. If you can't say something new, don't do it!”

Classic Ray. So—with the hundreds of arrangements I've done since leaving Eastman, I've always asked myself—can I say something new with this tune? If not I leave it alone...

Fred Sturm (MM '84)

In 1983-4, I served as Ray's JCM graduate teaching assistant and played under his direction in the Jazz Ensemble and Studio Orchestra. The Studio Orchestra was invited to perform at the 1984 IAJE Conference in Columbus, and I viewed the trek as a relaxing weekend getaway. While hanging out in the hotel with a roomful of S.O. pals the night before our performance, I got a call from Ray. "Clark Terry's sitting in with us tomorrow night. We need one of your big band charts expanded for studio orchestra." So much for my restful night! I loved the fact that he expected it of me.

Ray's way was the real world way, with the highest professional standards. He never dumbed it down for his students as players, writers, and teachers -- an immeasurable gift to all of his protégés.

Rich Thompson (MM '84)

Favorite one liner: “Parts have to match the score!”

“The jazz dept. is like a family and we all have jobs that we like and ones that we don’t. We run like a family and if someone is not here (in class), it effects all of us.” Ray told me this after I didn’t show for arranging one morning. Rochester had a huge snow storm and my car got buried by the snow plow. I planned ahead and didn’t miss any more classes 😊

“When you get out of Eastman, work for someone who likes and appreciates your skill and talent.”

Rick Vanmatre (MM '80)

Ray had the greatest facial expressions when rehearsing – delighted, appreciative, absorbed... Even when he seemed unhappy with the playing, he still looked supportive and caring!

Dave Wiffen (MM 88)

My Eastman experience had an enormous impact on me as a musician and as a person. Ray was one of the most important parts of my development in both regards. I can't overestimate the influence he still has on me both musically and personally.