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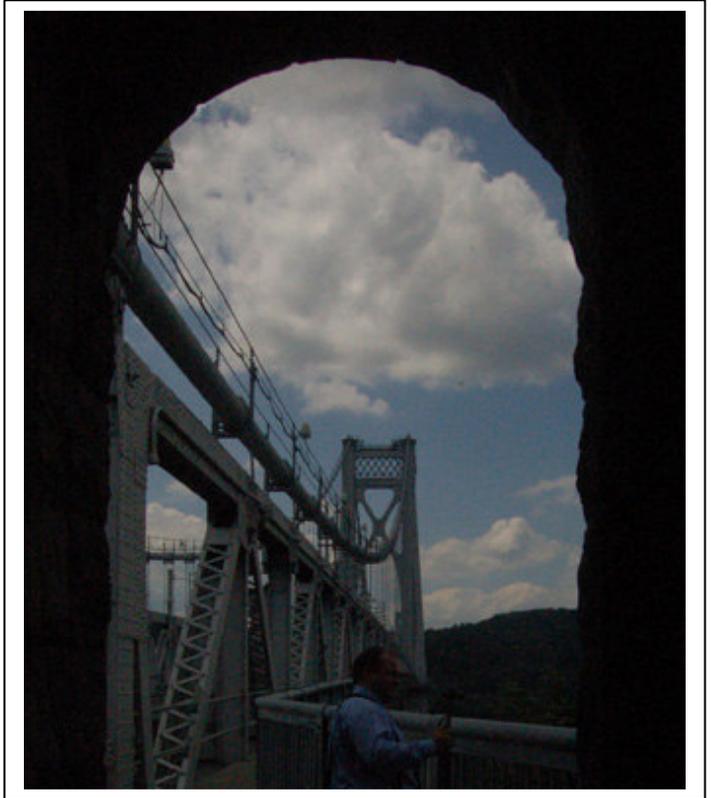
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## Takin' It To the Bridge

**Move over, James Brown;  
Joe Bertolozzi is the  
hardest-working  
man in show business**

By Steve Hopkins

Joseph Bertolozzi is nothing short of a force of nature, a man for whom the word “no” seems beyond the range of a usually sharp sense of hearing. Perhaps that’s the result of the life-changing childhood earache that led him to be alone in his bedroom for hours listening to the Disney version of the life stories of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, stories and music that inspired him to announce to the world at 9 years old that he was going to be a composer.



And now that a composer he has become, he still can’t seem to hear or understand the word “no.” That’s partly because Bertolozzi, who grew up in Poughkeepsie and went to school at Mount Carmel, has full-blown visions in his head that demand to be converted into reality. One such vision was the notion that he could compose music for and “play” a 3,000-foot-long suspension bridge that carries 14 million vehicles a year back and forth across the Hudson River between Poughkeepsie and Highland. Plowing through obstacles like the steamroller Eliot Spitzer wishes he was, Bertolozzi willed into being — in the middle of the Great Recession, mind you — a technically difficult and logistically improbable feat called “Bridge Music,” an 11-song recorded suite of percussive pieces featuring the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Mid-Hudson Bridge as a multitimbral instrument. In doing so, he managed to set off a minor international media feeding frenzy, as crews from *The New York Times*, Reuters and the BBC descended on Poughkeepsie, smitten with the very idea of what he was attempting. Now that Bertolozzi has completed his mission, he’s set his eyes and ears on the Eiffel Tower. Don’t think for a minute he can’t pull it off.

Bertolozzi is a hybrid, a cross between a classically schooled musician and a self-made man. Yes, he went to Vassar and majored in music, but by that time he had already for years been composing music for stage productions at The Bardavon. “I realized it was going to be a tough sell, getting an orchestra to play my music at the age of 13 or 14, 18 or 19, and I figured theatrical plays don’t typically have live music with them, although they did in the past,” says Bertolozzi, as if getting a mercurial, self-involved regional theater director to let a teenager write music for a serious play by Tennessee Williams was as easy as tossing a football in the backyard. “So I went to a couple of directors and I said ‘I’d be willing to write music for your play, if you give me credit for it in the program, you know, ‘Original Music by ...’”

Of course, he was successful. “The first one I did was called ‘The Eccentricities of a Nightingale;’ it was a Tennessee Williams play. It was done by the Hollywood Repertory Company at the Bardavon; it was an in-house company they were trying to get established.”

Having cleared the huge hurdle of getting his stuff performed and heard at an early age, Bertolozzi played his unfolding career smartly. He used his musical talents to score lucrative gigs directing music at churches, synagogues and schools, while continuing to compose longer and more involved works even as he searched for alternative angles to get himself and his music noticed.

### ***The gong show***

He chanced on one such tangent when his wife bought him a Javanese gong. “Being a composer, I knew that there were many different types of gongs out there,” says Bertolozzi. “So I got this one gong, and it was very cool, and then I said, ‘Let me get a Chinese gong, and another type of Chinese gong,’ and before you know it I had about 50 or 60 gongs. And I made a rig out of my Ultimate Support system I’d had for my keyboards, the Apache A-Frame, which they don’t make any more, and I arranged them for a solo percussion project.” He calls the rig the “Bronze Collection,” and as is his M.O., he scored work with it. “I was getting some bookings — I actually played at the U.S. Tennis Open as part of the grounds entertainment. When I’m playing, my arms are swinging; the gongs are arranged around me in a ‘U,’ at knee-level, chest level, and overhead.”

Yet again Bertolozzi’s wife, as his unwitting muse, played a major role in the next stage of his career. “So my wife again, God bless her — never thinking that that single gong would reproduce into 60 pieces — was standing one day next to a poster of the Eiffel Tower. She took a swing at it like I was hitting one of my gongs, and she went, ‘Bong!’

“And I thought to myself, ‘You know something? Everything vibrates, and if you hit that in the right place, you could get a tone out of that!’ And she immediately regretted having done that, because she knew what was going to happen. I’m always looking for ways to have my music played, and why not something like this? I thought, I can play the Eiffel Tower, I can write music for that. The concept was in a direct line with what I’d already been doing. Of course I don’t speak French, and I don’t have any contacts in Paris, so I thought, why don’t I try to do this on a domestic level?”

Well, why not?

### ***Suspension of disbelief***

A short series of consciousness leaps later, and Bertolozzi was on the doorstep of the New York State Bridge Authority, lobbying hard for a chance to implement his “Bridge Music” project.

After a period of study and comparative analysis, he had settled on the Mid-Hudson Bridge, a stone’s throw from his boyhood home, as his chosen target. “Number one, it had to be a suspension bridge, but I also wanted one that gave you access to as much of the bridge structure as possible from the sidewalk,” says Bertolozzi. “Because I didn’t want to put musicians up over the handrail, I mean, it’s dangerous; there are issues of insurance ... I was trying to keep costs down, and liability and risk management down. I also wanted as intimate a space as I could get. You know, it’s 3,000 feet long, but you feel like there’s a connection between Highland and Poughkeepsie. If you take a look at the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, you can’t even see the other side. In fact, when they designed it, they had to accommodate the curvature of the Earth, because it’s so long. The George Washington Bridge was so urban, and didn’t have the beauty that this bridge does. The sidewalk on the Bear Mountain Bridge doesn’t give you the same access that this bridge does. This was the best way to go, I thought. It was good as a venue, it was good to make music from.”

All he had to do was convince the Bridge Authority and about 1,000 other entities to agree with him. “I made a few calls, and I arranged a meeting with the chief engineer,” says Bertolozzi. “If he signs off on it then it’s up to the board if they want to allow something to happen.”

First off, the composer had to assuage their fears about safety. “The idea was to play the bridge live as a series of five live concerts: Friday night, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, Sunday afternoon, Sunday night, with 24 musicians, playing live from sheet music. So I would go out and write the music and position you in front of a handrail and you’d have your music. And every time your note came up you would pick up the right mallet and go ‘bong.’”

But first, Bertolozzi softened the board up by playing selections of his orchestral music. “Writing a symphony is like the Gold Standard,” says Bertolozzi. “If you can write for a symphony orchestra you can supposedly have a grasp of musicianship. So I showed them that, and this album had sold pretty well, so I had a commercial element to it as well, then I played them a recording from my Bronze Collection, the gong thing which was like a step between that and the bridge, and I told them my music for the bridge would be more along the lines of this. ‘As you can see from the first one,’ I said, ‘I know how to handle background, foreground, melody, texture, rhythm, you know ...’”

After the end of the meeting the engineer shook Bertolozzi’s hand and said, “Well, at least you didn’t turn out to be a nut job.”

He got permission to go onto the bridge for three days and record samples to put together a demo, which he would play for the board. “If you don’t like the demo, then we’re done, no harm, no foul,” Bertolozzi says he told them. “But if you do like it, I want you to give me permission to pursue this, and use your name, saying that I’m trying to put together this kind of event, and that I’m sanctioned by the New York State Bridge Authority.”

He went out with a small crew and recorded the sounds. “I recorded each surface several times,” he says. “I would hit them hard, medium and soft; then we’d hit it hard, medium and soft with the metal mallet, a rubber mallet, a Lucite mallet and a wooden mallet. We had between nine and twelve strikes for every note. And then when we were done with it we had to go into the studio and identify them.” Bertolozzi insists there was no electronic manipulation of the recorded tones to get a sound, pitch or tonal quality the bridge was not providing naturally. “The whole concept was to play the bridge; we weren’t going to play an effects box. I wanted to do this initial suite with the integrity of it just being the bridge. I’m not saying that I’m against that aesthetic; maybe with the second album there’ll be more processing involved. But I didn’t want the first one to be that. In fact we added reverb to just one sound.”

### ***Pass me that 'bong'***

Just logging all the sounds was a daunting task. “Talk about a headache,” says Bertolozzi. “Just going through, bong, bong, bong. We had like 700 samples to go through. Except that I knew what I wanted to do, I was like, ‘Oh, Jesus. This is taking longer than I thought.’”

“Every file had this big long name, like ‘Northwest Abutment Saddle, South Side Flange 1,’ just so we could find it again,” says Bertolozzi. “And then we’d have to listen to it. You know, I’m hearing a middle C, and I’m also hearing an F-sharp just below it, and I’m also hearing like an A-flat three octaves higher.”

The recorded tones were rarely aligned to what might be a composer’s wish list. “You know, it wasn’t calibrated as an instrument, it was calibrated as a bridge,” says Bertolozzi. “But all those different properties were there, so the names of the tones would say ... for example, if the first one was the loudest tone: middle C, we’d label it, plus all the overtones and undertones. Some tones were just like a thud. But others had these different overtones going on, which was important because in the context of

writing the music, sometimes if you combine one, which has three notes, and another one that has two notes, and when you put them together it might either cancel what is the loudest note, or if not cancel it, it might reinforce the high note. So that you didn't hear those low notes any more. What you would be hearing is that the third part of the hierarchy would be reinforced by this other note. So it's very contextual. And when I was writing the music, I found out right away that I could use one surface to produce more than one note, depending upon its context."

The three-day bridge recording session was in June of 2006; the demo, of "Bridge Funk," which turns out to have been the first song one hears on the album or the completed installation recording, was completed in September. Bertolozzi played it for the assembled board of NYSBA at their October meeting at their headquarters in Highland. "It was funny, because there was a table, I swear to Christ, a table the length of this building, like I'd never seen a table like this. And all the board of directors are sitting around it, and I had five minutes to make my pitch. So I took some time in the beginning — I was scripted, I was rehearsed — and I said, 'Here's the outboard handrail. Here's the spindle on the south side. And they're like, 'Yeah, yeah, that's what it sounds like. Yes, of course.' And I said, 'Now, here's the song.' So having given them the context — and 'Bridge Funk' was the first song that I wrote — I played those things. It starts out in little bits, and then, 'Oh, it's got some rhythm to it,' and then everything comes together and they're like, 'Oh, wow, this thing is cool.'"

In fact, they were astounded, and gave Bertolozzi the green light.

"I just said, it's not going to cost you any money," says Bertolozzi. "I'm going to need to use your name, and if I need a letter from you every once in a while, I'd appreciate that, too. So they wrote me a letter, and they let me go."

### ***Chasing the brass ring***

Almost immediately, Bertolozzi started garnering attention from the international press. "In 2007 *The New York Times* came and did a video and a story; and Reuters was there, BBC. I was doing international interviews, just for the idea. Of course, at that time it was still intended to be a live event. I was gathering this stuff in my arsenal so that when I went around to raise money, I could say 'Look, they covered this now and it was just an idea. They're going to follow up on it when it's for real, so ..."

His intention was to approach corporations and get them to front advertising dollars to finance the live broadcast. The budget was \$2.2 million. "The economy was already bad five years ago," says Bertolozzi. "When the time frame came for me to raise the money, it was last June to September, which was when everything started going bad real fast. I drew together all these different threads of people I knew in the business, trying to get advice on how to go about this, how to raise money without spending any money. I was doing great with the press. And what they told me was that these corporations typically commit their money a year out by quarter. So if you wanted to have something done in September, which was when this was originally slated for, of this year, you'd have needed them to commit the money in September of 2008. In order to get it on their plate for 2008, you've got to get it to them the quarter before that. So that means July through September, I was contacting, for various reasons. Verizon, Pepsi, Coca Cola, all these different corporations that spend \$2 million a week, on print maybe — and \$2 million on television, \$2 million on radio ... you know, they have that kind of money to spend. And I was trying to get them to say this was going to be a national celebration, even though it was on a regional basis.

"I was trying to liken it to the Jamestown 400th anniversary," he says. "The people at Jamestown had their stuff together. The New York State Fulton-Hudson Quadricentennial Commission — the first thing Gov. Paterson did was to slash their budget, massively — the commission went through five executive directors in as many years. They would meet twice a year. You would go to one meeting, and they'd say we'd like to welcome our new director, and you'd go to the next meeting six months later and that director was resigning. And then the next year the same thing would happen again. So as an

entrepreneur, I couldn't point to this stable organization that was making something happen. So I was kind of out there on my own."

The Quadricentennial Commission had originally planned to stage a number of "signature events" around the state; the Poughkeepsie area felt lucky to have been chosen as the venue for at least two of them, one being the gala Walkway Over the Hudson opening on October 3, and the other being, through Bertolozzi's incessant lobbying efforts, his live "Bridge Music" concert. The concert was slated for September. "But then because the money was taken away by the state, they telescoped everything into this one event (the Walkway opening)," says Bertolozzi. "At the same time, anyone that I might have had as a possibility of financing this was just going south. I was talking to Rolling Rock for a while, because they had a promotion about the moon — moonvertising, do you remember this? It was this bogus advertising campaign where they were going to project ads on the moon, they were going to the next frontier. And you could tell it was one of those goofy kind of commercials, but they were leading up to a certain date. They said, you know, 'On August 30, 2008 we're gonna project on the moon,' and so here's everybody watching the game, and it's that night, and everybody goes out to look at the moon and nothing happens, so the next day of course they have a commercial that said, you know, 'We had technical trouble, but we're workin' on it.' So I was going to them, I said, 'Look. You know, Henry Hudson sailed up the river on the *Half Moon*; this could be a Half-Moonvertising kind of thing. I was trying to work every angle possible. That was one instance, where I was talking to the guy, and he said, 'Joe, I gotta get off the phone, we're puttin' fires out left and right, I gotta get back to you.' While I was talking to him, Anheuser-Busch was bought by a Japanese company. With all that, there was no way I was going to get a \$2 million project off the ground."

### *Let's go to the audiotape*

Bertolozzi went to the Dyson Foundation, Central Hudson and other local benefactors, but no one was prepared to take on another cause in a down economy. "So I could have just let all that work go by the wayside — but that's not me," says Bertolozzi, who credits Poughkeepsie Mayor John Tkazyik with reawakening an idea he had entertained earlier. "This was October of '08. I had a meeting with the mayor of Poughkeepsie, and he said, 'Can't you have some kind of speakers to play the music? You don't have to have it live, do you?' And I was thinking about this. My wife, again, had suggested something like this earlier on, but in my mind this was a live event, and that was the whole importance of the thing. And when he mentioned it in that meeting, I thought maybe I should visit this a bit better, and I spoke to somebody who was another advisor, and he said, 'Let's turn this into an installation; you have all the sounds, you can write the music still. It just won't be live.' And in fact, this was something I was hoping we would do after the live event; have a permanent fixture. But the way it turned out, this came first. And this only cost \$13,000 or \$14,000."

Once committed to the idea, Bertolozzi turned on the fundraising afterburners. "I still had to go out there and raise the money. In fact, if you go out and look at the signs on the bridge, on the CD itself, and on the brochure that I have, I list everybody who sent me \$25. Some sent me \$100, some wrote me a letter, some gave me a lead that went somewhere. All those people helped make this, but I did have to develop that."

Most importantly, he found a seam with Dutchess County Tourism and Ulster County Tourism. "They're going to spend the money for tourism somehow, why not spend it on 'Bridge Music?' It was Dutchess Tourism's Mary Kay Vrba who came through in the clutch. "She went to the Dutchess County IDA for a grant, and they allocated money to Dutchess County Tourism for 'Bridge Music.' That was amount matched by Ulster County, and that got us to about ten grand. The remaining money was money that, again, I raised from patrons."

And that was that.

“The real story here is how all these municipal and public concerns came together to make this happen for everybody’s enjoyment,” says Bertolozzi, waxing magnanimous. “I just wanted to play the bridge. But of course, I had to bring all this other stuff together to make it happen. And I couldn’t have done it without \$25 here and \$10 there; it all added up. Along with tremendous goodwill and cooperation from the City of Poughkeepsie, the Town of Lloyd, the County of Ulster, Dutchess County, the New York State Bridge Authority, I mean, just tremendous cooperation.”

### *No static at all*

“Bridge Music” is playing 24 hours a day, year round, on FM 95.3. You can hear it in spots along the Poughkeepsie waterfront, at Waryas Park, and at listening stations, including one in the middle of the bridge, which will run from April 1 to October 31, when they come down for the winter.

“Each radio installation is site-specific,” says Bertolozzi. “We broadcast to a 200-foot radius — the FCC allows people to have a 200-foot broadcast without getting a license. The Waryas Park installation makes it accessible to people who are afraid of heights, afraid of bridges, infirm, or when it’s raining out or otherwise impossible to go on the bridge. You have to find a channel that isn’t broadcasting. We chose 95.3. Right now they haven’t opened up the bidding for new frequencies in this area. If they did open it up and somebody wanted that frequency and bought it, we’d have to find another one. We looked at AM and other possibilities, but this was the best option in terms of sound quality, and was the least hassle. Also, we’re using full-resolution MP3s. MP3s normally run at, I think, 128 kilobytes per second. And these are running at, like, 2100 kilobytes per second. So it’s like the actual recording, not cut down.”

The FM broadcast sounds like any other classical FM radio station; each piece is announced, and there’s a station ID at the top of the order. On the bridge pedestrian walkway, the installation is an on-demand menu of choices, with a sign that tells you what you’re choosing.

Meanwhile, it looks as if Bertolozzi will probably be able to capitalize further on the project and its notoriety. He’s already received inquiries about doing installations in Montreal and Dubai. But for now he’s content to take a break and watch the “Bridge Music” CD (on Delos Records) sell. “The album went to number 18 on the Billboard crossover chart, and 35 on the classical chart,” says Bertolozzi, “so it’s making an impression.”

The composer claims he’s shot, and needs “a serious bit of R&R. For five years, except for my church jobs, this has been nothing but ‘Bridge Music.’ I work for Vassar Temple in Poughkeepsie, and Christ Episcopal Church in Suffern, and I direct the Poughkeepsie Boys’ Choir. Plus I have a family I like to spend time with. Somewhere in there I wrote a piece for the Eastman School of Music, and I wrote a couple of other pieces, plus all the fundraising and other stuff — this was not all fun and games. I had to go to meetings on signage, and riverfront meetings, and seriously un-sexy things to make this happen.

“I’m writing a piece for a friend who plays French horn, but I’m not even thinking about it until September,” continues Bertolozzi, not sounding quite believable when talking of relaxing and taking things easy. “I just want to be free of that kind of work ... although, the original idea was to play the Eiffel Tower. So I would like to pursue that; I have something to prove that it can be done. I invited the cultural attaché of the French Consulate to come — I haven’t heard back yet. I’ll just keep on inviting her until she comes.”

Now *that’s* the Joseph Bertolozzi we recognize.

“We’ll see,” he says, getting all pumped up again. “I’ve got a lot of good press, and the album is coming out in Europe in October.”

Go get ’em, Joe. Our money’s on you.