



Late Night with

LaBamba

How a taste for style helped make Richie Rosenberg America's best-known trombone player

by Patrick Jones

Richie Rosenberg had a trombone thrust into his hands four decades ago. It has meant sweet music—for him and his fans—ever since.

The surprise gift came from the instrumental director at his junior high school, Leroy Evans, who was losing much of his brass section to graduation.

"He handed me a trombone and said, 'Take it home over the summer, kid. Learn this and come back and see me next

year.' I just said, 'OK,'" says Rosenberg. "We still keep in touch. I owe it all to him."

He grew up favoring music by the likes of J.J. Johnson, Otis Redding and Teddy Pendergrass. "That's kind of my stable list of artists that can branch out all over the place."

Rosenberg, aka LaBamba, 53, is now one of the best slide men in the business. He is a bona fide celebrity among his native Philadelphians, knowledgeable music fans, denizens

of The Stone Pony and other New Jersey shore haunts, and, primarily, sleep-deprived devotees of one wacky late-night talk show.

Rosenberg is the Panama hat-sporting trombonist for the Max Weinberg 7, the house band for NBC's *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. He was an original member of the Miami Horns and remains a longtime fixture with Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes, a band that defined Jersey Shore rock and roll in the '70s and '80s. The Jukes played a major influence in the careers of Bruce Springsteen, Gary U.S. Bonds, Jon Bon Jovi and many others, and LaBamba still performs with Springsteen on tour and in studio sessions. He has also recorded with Joe Cocker, Ricky Martin and Diana Ross, to name a few. And somehow he still finds time to front LaBamba and the Hubcaps as well as LaBamba's Big Band, aka 18 Pieces of Soul.

But Rosenberg vaulted into the mainstream national consciousness through his high-profile gig with Conan, and not just because of his musical skills: He is a willing participant in the show's edgy comedy skits. In February, LaBamba shaved off his mustache in a bit parodying Britney Spears, who had just shaved her head. And in one of the show's running gags, O'Brien frequently implies that Rosenberg is gay. He isn't. LaBamba, straight man (double entendre intended) to O'Brien's comedic frenzy, has five children, ranging in ages four to 18, and has been married to his wife, Susan, for 20 years.

LaBamba's distinctive nickname was established by Springsteen, who had yet to achieve his superstar status when the pair first met. They were hanging out at the famed The Stone Pony in Asbury Park, N.J., the night of Rosenberg's audition with Southside Johnny. A roadie for the band decided Rosenberg needed a nickname.

"I had an Afro and a Fu Manchu (mustache) at the time," says Rosenberg. "Everybody from Asbury Park was given a nickname: Jukes (Southside Johnny), The Boss (Springsteen) and Miami (Steven Van Zandt with the Asbury Jukes, Springsteen's E Street Band and later an actor on *The Sopranos*). The roadie said, 'We have to come up with a nickname to call this guy. He looks Spanish. How about LaBamba?' I'm Jewish, not Spanish," LaBamba now laughs. "But Bruce got up on the bar there and started shouting, 'Give me an L; give me an A; give me a B.' He christened me, you know. And I kept (the nickname). A lot of guys don't keep their nickname, but it kind of stuck with me."

LaBamba's headdress has also stayed with him. He credits Van Zandt for the Panama hat look that has become his signature.

"Steven was the manager for the Asbury Jukes at the time," says Rosenberg. "He was always on top of what clothing people should wear. He thought that a Panama (hat) would look all right on me, so we checked that out. And it did. That became the staple of my wardrobe. I always wore the same kind of Panama for years. I got them from a store in Asbury Park. I



Rosenberg has been a member of Late Night's Max Weinberg 7 since the show's debut in 1993.



didn't care what kind of make they were."

He now gets top-of-the-line hats from Tony Lippi with The Panama Hat Company (www.perfectpanamas.com) in St. Augustine, Fla. Lippi says he customizes them for LaBamba by adjusting the brims to make them "trombone-proofed," minimizing the chances of the hat being knocked off his head while performing. Rosenberg's favored style is the Fino Montecristi. LaBamba estimates he owns close to two dozen of the hats, sized at 7-1/8.

As a quick primer, the highest quality Panama hats are actually made in Ecuador. The Ecuadorian hats were sold in Panama during the construction of the Panama Canal, and the name "Panama hat" has stuck in the succeeding years. U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt wore one during a visit and popularized the look. Authentic Panamas are made of the leaves of the *Carloduvica palmata*, a palm-like plant called "*paja toquilla*" in Spanish.

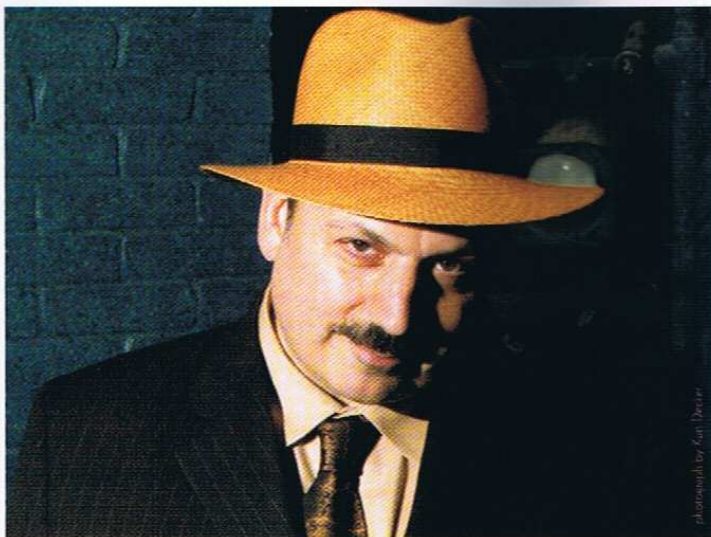
Panama hats have stylishly graced the heads of some of the world's most recognizable figures: Roosevelt, Humphrey Bogart, Michael Jordan, Winston Churchill and Clark Gable. LaBamba can at least, based on his dedication to the straw fedoras, attempt to toss his own hat into that notable ring of fame.

He says the hat never leaves his head except when relaxing at home.

"I always wear a hat in public," says LaBamba. "I have that natural yarmulke on the back of my head now," laughs the jovial Rosenberg, joking about his bald spot. "I'm not much for hair replacement. I enjoy the hats so much that I'll stick with that. I think I'll get buried in one when it's time."

Along with his penchant for hats, Rosenberg also confesses to being a bit of a clothes hound. He prefers suits and says the formal look makes him a better musician.

"I like the way (suits) feel on me," says LaBamba. "I am a little stockier kind of guy. Wearing a suit gives you a good feeling about yourself. I think that all performers feel that if



LaBamba in his favored Montecristi.

The roadie said, 'We have to come up with a nickname to call this guy. He looks Spanish. How about LaBamba?' I'm Jewish, not Spanish."

the clothes feel just right, then it is going to help your performance. That even goes down to the shoes. The times that I have chosen to wear sneakers on the stage, it just doesn't work for me—even playing with Bruce. We don't wear suits with Bruce for the most part, though we did wear three-piece suits on his *Tunnel of Love* tour.

"I have lots of clothes and lots of shoes," Rosenberg says. "My problem is that I have a love for clothes, but I am buying so many different sizes"—he admits to a couple of significant weight swings since joining Conan's show. "I wouldn't have to buy any more clothes if I (kept my weight where I wanted it). I have already bought so many things that I love."

LaBamba says the development of his personal style has been a slow evolution.

"You learn as you go," explains Rosenberg. "It's like learning about fine wine. I had a good, solid beginning in clothing because my stepfather was a salesman for a company called Salvatori Belts. There were a lot of clothing stores that he would go to and bring me along. He was a clothes maniac. He had closets full of suits and shoes."

Regarding his own footwear, LaBamba prefers to wear the Allen-Edmonds brand, which he says are "great, comfortable shoes" as well as being occasional attention-grabbers. "I have a pair of black and white spectators," he says, describing his wingtips. "People always stop me when I am wearing those things—on a plane or on a job—saying 'Man, those shoes look great. Where did you get those?'"

As far as contemporary styles, well, LaBamba admits to being stuck about a half-century in the past.

"I wish thin ties were back in," he says. "I enjoy the '50s look. I used to buy some retro clothing from that era. I like the jackets with a real narrow lapel. Remember the suit worn by Jerry Lewis in *The Nutty Professor*? That's a great jacket—that wild tux with the stripes in it. I love that look."

That look, of course, would be LaBamba's perfect wardrobe—but only if it included just the right "trombone-proof" Panama hat to top it off. ❀