AN HONORABLE PROFESSION: BENNY POWELL
Bob Bernotas

Born in New Orleans on March 1, 1930, Benny Powell is best known for his twelve-year tenure (1951–63) with Count Basie, his contribution to the Count's all-time hit, "April in Paris," and his blues-laced, storytelling approach to improvisation. After leaving Basie, Powell embarked upon a rich, diverse musical career, working extensively on Broadway, television, and recordings, and becoming an activist in the cause of jazz. He spent most of the 1970s in Hollywood, where he worked on *The Merv Griffin Show* and began to make his name as a leader and composer. Returning to New York in the early 1980s, Powell connected with two visionary instrumentalist-composers, the late clarinetist John Carter and pianist Randy Weston, with whom he still performs.

An unsuccessful kidney transplant in 1990 caused Powell to undergo thrice weekly dialysis treatments, but he never let it keep him from working, and even touring, with the likes of Weston, Benny Carter, and Jimmy Heath. Since his second – and this time successful – transplant in January 1996, Powell has been even more vigorous and as active as ever.

People have an impression of New Orleans as a place where music is always in the air. How accurate is that? Was there a lot of music around when you were growing up?

Well, it was pretty well right back then. Of course, I haven't lived in New Orleans for many years, but I think it's still relatively true. When I was coming up there was plenty of music. It was just part of everyday life. You didn't really have to go anywhere to hear music, all you had to do was wake up and listen. You know, it's hot there, so people would leave doors open, and you could hear much more than you would in, say, Philadelphia, where it's insulated.

When I was a kid in New Orleans, at twelve years old I used to listen to a radio show for children called *Let's Pretend*. It came on about 11:00. Then at 2:00 you'd get the bands broadcasting – Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, Count Basie. To me, when I first started listening to this, it was like magic. All of this stuff would seem to be taking place on another planet. So hearing musicians and thinking about what the ambience was like where they were playing was, to me, very foreign. With my imagination I made it something good.

And as fate would have it, when I found myself in a position to be that musician that other people were listening to, I found it just as magical. One of the things I love about working with Randy Weston is, when he hired me, maybe fifteen or twenty years ago, he said, "BP, I'm just trying to put the magic back in the music." And I said, "Fine. Please let me join you." And those of us who are performers know that it is magical, and we treat it as such.

How did you happen to take up the trombone?

It was part of the New Orleans folklore. You've heard about the parades that they have there. I think I was in a parade. Not actually walking in the parade – I was riding in one of the cars. I can't remember how I got there, maybe my mother or somebody in my family belonged to the sponsoring organization. These parades were created by organizations. People in those days wanted a good funeral, so working people belonged

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to these organizations that promised them a good burial if they paid their dues. That's the premise behind a lot of those parades.

Now I'm not sure this was a funeral parade. It could have been a social club parade. At any rate, I was riding in an open car, and right behind my car was the band. Trombones are usually in front so the slides won't be knocking people out of the way. Well, I turned around in this open car and saw the trombone player – I think he was the only one – and I was fascinated by this shiny instrument and this guy parading down the street playing it. I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

The parade stopped frequently for rest periods. It would stop at different homes, and the musicians would go in for refreshments and come back. Well, at one of these stops I must have expressed my interest to my mother, and I met the trombone player. And I found out – I just talked to him briefly – he was a very fascinating man, so I think I became enamored with his personality as well as the shininess of the horn.

Well, that was my first experience with the trombone. I played a parade drum when I was nine years old. It was my first instrument. By the time I was twelve, I was at an uncle's house and I was sort of kneeling backwards on a sofa, as kids do, and behind the sofa was this case. So I asked my uncle what was in it, and he took it out and it happened to be a trombone that he had bought for one of his children, who decided that he was more interested in sports. He opened the case to let me see it, and I expressed interest in it, so he said, "Well, you can take it home and see if you like it."

I did and I liked it very much. My mother found a teacher, Mr. Eddie Pearson, who was quite a great player and a great teacher. He's one of the trombone players who didn't really gain that much popularity. You'll find a lot of fine musicians who never did have much prominence other than in New Orleans.

A lot of guys in New Orleans – I didn't realize it then – depend upon tourism. So there are a lot of jobs there. And by being in a Catholic state, there are many religious celebrations. All during Mardi Gras and Easter there are balls and dances held. New Orleans had a lot of dance halls. So there was a lot of work for musicians, and there still is, I believe. And most New Orleans musicians were real family guys. In fact, there were a lot of family bands where the whole family plays. So the guys didn't really have to leave New Orleans to make a living.

New Orleans is, of course, known for traditional jazz, but you were coming of age during the birth of bebop. Were you caught between the two?

No, I was a "bebop baby." I wasn't interested in the older New Orleans music because by the time bebop came in, I was just becoming a teenager. A friend of mine had been to New York, and he came back and brought these bebop records. I remember one was "Shaw 'Nuff" by Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. And once he played that for us, we were all hooked, me and all my friends.

'Cause, you see, I played in a kids' band. We were all teenagers, thirteen and fourteen – I mean, real teenagers. But we had a band, and it was a working band. I don't know how we got away with it, but we used to play dances and so forth. The leader of the band was Dooky Chase. Dooky Chase is a restaurant owner now, but he was a bandleader then. I think he was maybe a year or two older than us, and his father was a businessman, so that qualified him to be the leader. He played trumpet. He owns one of the most famous restaurants in New Orleans now.

So you were a professional at a very early age.

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Yes, at fourteen. It was by accident. Not that I had gained that much proficiency, but you have to remember that World War II was still on and a lot of the professional musicians were away. A gig came up New Year's Eve of 1944 at the USO club, and they needed a trombone player. What they really needed was a warm body who could at least play some trombone. So somehow my name came up and I got the gig.

In those days we used to play what were called stock arrangements. They were actually arrangements of popular tunes that the big bands had made famous. Well, I used to listen to Tommy Dorsey. One of his solos that I had memorized was "Song of India," but in this stock arrangement of it, the trombone solo was actually written down. When we got to this number, the bandleader said, "Do you think you can handle the solo, kid?" I said, "Yeah."

So I sort of stuck my head in the sheet, really looked at the sheet hard like I was reading, but I had memorized it already. I must have sounded pretty good and surprised everybody, because they didn't expect too much out of me. I was a fourteen-year-old kid who was just filling in. But evidently I impressed them enough to get a job with the band. And I always did kind of laugh at that because they thought I was reading, and I never told them any different. Although I could read. I told you, I studied with Eddie Pearson and he made sure that I could read. I wasn't just a blowing musician who depended upon his ear.

You also went on the road at an early age.

Yeah, sixteen. Well actually, I went to Alabama State College. I was sort of an egghead, and I was lucky, too, so I skipped grades and I went to college when I was sixteen.

My mother raised us all because my father died of a heart attack when he was just in his late twenties. She was left with three girls – my sisters Verna, Elizabeth, and June – and one boy. When my dad died, my mother found herself overqualified because she had graduated from Xavier University. (At that time it was called Xavier Preparatory School.) My mother put us all through college ironing shirts and doing domestic work. So to me, she is a true hero.

I must have been about seven when my father died. My family told me I was the man of the house, and they treated me like the man of the house. So I grew up very fast. I never was engaged in foolish things. I got my first job at an aircraft factory when I was twelve or thirteen, and I got my first job as a professional musician at age fourteen. For years I thought I was very talented – you know, I started at fourteen. But I found out later that a lot of guys got a head start at a young age then because most of the adults were in the army in World War II.

At any rate, I went to college at Alabama State Teachers College. I had chosen that college because Erskine Hawkins' whole band had come from Alabama State, and I knew that was where I could go to get training to be part of a big band, because when I first got interested in music, big bands were prevalent. In fact, every Sunday in New Orleans a big band would play – Billy Eckstine's band, Tiny Bradshaw's band. (I don't think I saw Count Basie.) I remember Billy Eckstine's band very well because, as I said, I was a bebop baby, and I knew of Gene Ammons, Dexter Gordon, and all the bebop all-stars who were in that band. So I wanted to be a part of a big band. I knew then that I wanted to be a professional musician, and I went to Alabama State specifically hoping that it would make me one.

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Well, when I came home for the summer break, there was a fellow, Arnold DePass – he is a trumpet player – who was going to join King Kolax's band. He told me there was an opening, and he told me to check with my mother to see if she would let me go. He was a little bit older than me, and he could look out for me, so my mother gave me permission. So I joined King Kolax in Port Arthur, Texas, when I was sixteen, and I never looked back.

I tell my students that's the name of the game. {Drummer] Jo Jones had a phrase that I think is great: "When you see opportunity, handcuff it." And I instinctively did that from Day One. I took advantage of the opportunity, and I've sort of been doing that throughout my career. I think opportunity presents itself every day to a lot of us, but we miss a lot of opportunities that would give us exactly what we want. We're so busy, carried away with this or that or some other thing, until it knocks on the door and we don't even hear it. And it goes away.

With King Kolax's band I traveled around the Midwest and ended up stranded in Oklahoma City. Somehow I got word that there was another orchestra, a territory band, working in Oklahoma. That was Ernie Fields, but he was based in Tulsa. I don't know how, but I got an offer to join Ernie Fields' band in Tulsa.

In those days bands got stranded often. We traveled on buses, and sometimes we'd get to a town and, for whatever reason, the job that we were going to wasn't there. Sometimes there was a mix-up in booking. Other times we'd get there and the nightclub had burned down. Anyway, we were stranded in that town until Kolax could get in touch with the head office, which was in Indianapolis, and get some money to get us rolling and moving out of there.

During one of those stranded periods we stayed in Oklahoma City for a little while. At first we had two guys to a room. Then as we stayed there for a longer period and the money started running down, it was three guys to a room. After a while it was four guys to a room. It went on like that until – I think the band was about twelve guys – there were six of us sleeping in one room, and the other six were walking the streets! I was sixteen or seventeen, so what the heck did I care?

During this time that the band was stranded, [drummer] Vernel Fournier was my roommate. I went downstairs, walked through the lobby like I was going out shopping or something, and I went around behind the building. Vernel lowered my bag out of a window on a rope, and I grabbed it and ran to the bus station. That's how I got out of Oklahoma City to join Ernie Fields' band in Tulsa.

At that time, territory bands, like King Kolax and Ernie Fields, provided important experience for a lot of young musicians, didn't they?

Oh, yeah. I'm sorry that the big bands aren't around now, because they were a wonderful training ground to teach musicians how to blend with other musicians, for example. And because I was a young guy, the older guys in the band were the ones who taught me all about life, how to dress, manners, how to carry myself, how to conduct myself. I think the older guys kind of took to me because they could see that I was trying to live in the tradition. And I asked them different things. You know, "How do you this? How do you do that?" And they were always very gracious because I was a gentlemanly young guy from New Orleans and I never overstepped my bounds.

Musicians in those days really loved to see the younger guys coming up, and these days, too. Like Jimmy Heath and Clark Terry. Any musician can walk up to them

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and ask them anything about anything, and they'll give you a good, clear answer. (Just don't walk up to them with any nonsense.) Jazz musicians, the good ones, are very giving. I don't know if their reason is the same as mine, but when older guys would give me these answers, I'd say, "Thank you so much. Can I pay you something?" They'd said, "No. When the situation is reversed, you do the same thing for a younger guy. That's the payment that I want."

I guess Lionel Hampton was your first big-time gig. How did you join him?

Well, this has to do with Oklahoma, too. It seems like, in retrospect, I was pretty much at the right place at the right time, because I was in Tulsa and Lionel Hampton's band came through. Now the day previous to this, one of his trombone players, Chips Outcalt, had quit. So Lionel Hampton was short one trombone player when he got to Tulsa.

[Singer] Betty Carter was with the band at this time, and Hamp depended upon her expertise with younger musicians, depended upon her to tell him who the beboppers, or potential beboppers, were. I didn't find this out 'til way later. She was at a performance a few years ago, and she told one of my nieces that Hamp came to her and asked, "Well, what do you think of this guy?" And she gave me thumbs up. That's the way I joined Hamp's band. But I don't think, before or since, any name band has gone to Tulsa looking for a trombone player. I happened to be in the right spot at the right time.

You joined Count Basie in a more conventional way.

Well, I had been living in Canada for a while, and when I came back to New York in 1951, I was around town just looking for a job. Frankly, I wanted to go with [saxophonist] Charlie Ventura's band. [Trombonist] Bennie Green had just been with the band, and I would have loved to have been in that position because that would be a small band and I would get a chance to develop as a trombone player. I also wanted to join Illinois Jacquet's band because he was using trombone. So I actually wanted to play with a small band.

At any rate, in the interim I was working at the Apollo Theatre, playing for the acts and so forth, and one of the saxophone players with this particular band, Charlie Fowlkes, told me that Basie was reorganizing a big band. At the time Basie had a small group with Clark Terry and [clarinetist] Buddy DeFranco.

And Wardell Gray was the tenor saxophonist in that small band.

Yes. A fine band. But I think as great as it was, Basie was used to having all that power behind him. So Charlie Fowlkes told me where they were rehearsing and suggested I come there. I did and stayed twelve years!

But you never really got hired officially, did you?

Oh, yeah. I always tell a story about "Base" having a little pixie side of his character. He would sort of toy with you. If he had something that you wanted, he would eventually give it to you, but he would dangle it in front of you for a long time.

When I first joined his band we began playing just weekends out from New York. The first weekend we played in Boston – I remember it was October 11. When we came back to New York he gave us the dates for the next weekend. This happened for a couple of weekends. But since I had my name on file, so to speak, with Illinois Jacquet, I kept trying to get Basie to tell me, "Benny, you're hired. You got a job." Then I wouldn't have to pursue these other things. I just wanted a job with somebody with whom I could further my career and learn something.

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Mind you, I'm a kid of twenty-one and I'm talking to Count Basie. So I'd ask him, "Mr. Basie, how do you like the trombone section?" He'd say, "It's OK, kid," and that sort of ended the conversation, you know? Then the next time I'd ask him, "Well, Mr. Basie, do the trombones sound all right?" He'd say, "They sound great, kid." So it went on like this for weeks, me trying to get him to say, "Benny, you're hired." The most I got out of him was, maybe after asking him about six or seven times, he'd say, "You're here, aren't you, kid?"

I just wanted him to say, "Benny, you're hired. You got a job." He never did. And after about two or three years, it finally dawned on me, "Well, Benny, you are here, you must have the job. So accept that."

Why did you finally leave Basie?

Well, after twelve years I felt it was time to grow, time for me to stretch out. Basie was such a beautiful guy I could tell him that, and I left with his blessings. And he told me if there was anything at all he could help me with, don't hesitate to come back and ask him.

It seems like no matter how long you've been out of the band, you're still thought of as a Basie-ite.

People still ask me, "Is the band in town?" And I left the band in 1963! So you know, people very much associate me with the band, and I'm proud to say that because it's opened a lot of doors for me. When I got my first Broadway show or my first television show, it was because I had been with Count Basie and they figured, "If he was with Count Basie's band for twelve years, this guy must know something." So it's always stood me in good stead. But once you were with Basie, you're with the Basie family. Basie always stressed, "This is a family," and he always treated it as such.

I'm wondering if one of the reasons you left Basie was that, as a trombonist in a big band, you didn't get a lot of chances to solo.

That's correct. Traditionally trombonists have been stepchildren. When the trumpet player finishes playing, then the tenor player plays, and after that comes the drum solo. In the meantime the trombone player has had maybe eight bars in the whole arrangement. The thing I was most remembered for with Basie was the little melody that I played in the bridge to "April in Paris." I knew that, no matter what, I would get a chance to play that because it was a hit for Basie's band. That's why we all eventually have to leave big bands if we want to be soloists, because traditionally we just don't get enough chances to play.

And then Al Grey was with the band. Al Grey was a bit older than me, much more experienced and so forth, also a very fine trombone player, and he got most of the solo space, much to the detriment of Henry Coker and myself. Henry Coker was a fine trombonist, but Al was a bit more aggressive. Also, Al "got over," so to speak. I mean, he was very impressive to a wide audience. And that's what bandleaders look for, guys who can do that.

Anyway, Al got the largest share of the solo space, deservedly so, and Henry Coker got a great part of it, too. I was, I guess, kind of the third soloist, in a sense – certainly in my mind, because those guys were more experienced. And I didn't feel badly because of it. I learned from them. But there was a time, after twelve years, when I needed to split just to develop my own career and my own capacity to be a trombonist.

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Plus with Basie's band, if you weren't careful, you could develop a formula solo. That meant you played the same solo every night and the rhythm section sort of built their responses to your solo. So it's not so much that I wanted to start my own band. It's just that I didn't get the opportunity to play that much with Basie's band.

I have a philosophy. If you want to do anything, of course, you should study towards that. But you should sort of act as if you're there already. For instance, I wanted to be an out-front guy with my own band. So I had to start preparing myself for it, find out what it takes to make a bandleader. Also, I had to start carrying myself like a bandleader.

I'll tell you a for-instance. When I first started leading my own band, I had been a sideman for many years. Before, when I would get a gig in a club as a sideman, during the break I'd sit around until somebody came and got me and said, "Benny, it's time to go on." When I became a leader, I found myself still sitting there, waiting for somebody to tell me to go on. Then it would occur to me, "There's nobody who's gonna tell you to go on now, Benny. You're it. You have to tell the other guys to go on." So you have to break old habits. I had to start acting like a bandleader.

When you are on the bandstand, how do you go about creating a favorable impression with the audience?

Well, first of all, I think the bandstand should be treated with the same sanctity you'd treat an altar. You don't deface it. You don't get on the bandstand with a cigarette and a glass of whisky in your hands. While you're there, you only concentrate on the music or music-related things. You have very little time to be up there, so devote all your time to the task at hand. People have paid good money to come and see you. They didn't pay money to see you talk to your friends or crack jokes and all of that. I'm not saying be stiff, but by all means focus on the reason you're up there and know that people are looking at you. You are on stage, so your demeanor is supposed to reflect this.

Being a jazz musician is an honorable profession. Along with that goes treating the bandstand like an altar. When you get on the bandstand, have performing number one in your mind. Give the music your undivided attention. That's where the honor comes in, because you respect it.

And by all means, focus on the music and focus on being creative with it. If you're with a group that really doesn't have written music – or even if it does have written music – try and make each tune creative. I mean, even if you're doing standards, if you're doing "All the Things You Are" or "Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise," try and do something different with it. Don't just do the intro, the head, blowing, and out. That's predictable. If the audience hears you do that maybe two or three times, pretty soon they can just about predict what you're going to play.

So the thing is to create at the moment. That's why you have to listen to what everybody else is playing, because something you hear coming from the piano or the drums might spark an idea in you and you go off that. That's why your concentration has to be on the bandstand.

And plan what you're going to do before you get on the bandstand. You can always change it. Even when you go to jam sessions, have two or three tunes that you think everybody knows. So this avoids all of that stuff: "What are we gonna play?" "Oh, I don't know, man. What do you wanna play?" I think that hurts a lot of musicians more so than they realize.

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I'm glad you brought that up, since for a time you hosted a weekly jam session for Local 802. I'd like to hear your feelings about jam sessions.

Older musicians taught me that when you join anything or when you go anywhere, keep your mouth shut and find out what you're joining first. See, being a musician is such a thing of talent and ego that you have to keep both in balance, ego especially, because when people are telling you that you sound good and all that, you start to believe that you're the latest hot thing. And once you start believing that, then you stop growing.

Well, for jam sessions the same thing applies. When you go to a jam session, have a tune, have two or three tunes, and when anybody asks you what you want to play, name those two or three tunes. But you'd more or less be on the money if you go to that jam session first and just listen to what the other guys are playing. The first time you go to the session, you can take your horn, but don't sit in. Listen to see what you're joining and then have those tunes that you can call.

And by all means, jam sessions are not places to practice. In our jam sessions [at Local 802] we normally had very good rhythm sections, real experienced guys who spent many years playing. I would tell everybody, "When you come up, don't use these guys to get your stuff together. Since you've got fine musicians, this is the time to shoot your best shot and have them make you sound very good." So I look at it as more of a showcase. And that's because most people who are going to jam sessions now haven't the vaguest idea of how jam sessions were created or what they were created for. They think "jam session" now means that you go and show everybody what you know.

So they jump on the stand and play twenty-four choruses on "Star Eyes."

Yeah. And hopefully somebody's going to say, "You sure sound good," and give you a gig. But if you do that, if you play twenty-four choruses of anything, chances are you're not going to get a gig, because somebody's going to say, "Well, I don't need that in my band."

What leader needs somebody who's going to play twenty-four choruses on a gig?

What leader needs somebody who's going to be *dumb enough* to play twenty-four choruses? A leader's looking for somebody who's smart. And brevity is it. You know, say what you've got to say in two or three choruses, maybe four. I mean, if you're really .hot, stretch out in five. But you don't need more than five choruses to show people what you know.

A lot of times, the older you get in music, the more you'll find out that less is more. Leave spaces and don't play everything you know. As a matter of fact, when I worked with "Sweets," [trumpeter] Harry Edison, a few years ago, he was a lesson in that. He knew very well how to use a rhythm section. If he was going to play seven choruses, the first two would be kind of sparse. He'd make a statement, then get out of the way, and the rhythm section would kind of cover. He'd gradually build it up. This was a technique he used, and it's one that we could all benefit from learning, because it gives your solo somewhere to go. I mean, you don't play everything you know in the first two or three bars.

I'd like you to tell the story behind the trombone you currently are using.

I'm playing a King 2B that was given to me by Tommy Dorsey when I was with Count Basie. He used to come down to Birdland all the time to hear the band. I don't

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know how it came about, but he gave me a trombone and he gave one to Henry Coker as well.

When he gave it to me I was just beginning to play bass trombone – I was playing a Conn 88H with the F trigger – so for a long time I didn't even play the horn. I loaned it to Jimmy Cleveland, maybe for 20 years, and he didn't want to give it back! Well just a few years ago I took the horn out and said, "Let me see how this thing plays," and it played perfectly. Since I hadn't played it and hadn't seen it for so long – Cleve had kept it for all that time – I was under the impression that it was much heavier than it is. I don't know where I got that impression. I play it most of the time, now

Let's shift gears for a moment and talk about your involvement as a jazz activist.

Over the years I have been active on many levels. Now what I hope to do is coin a new genre of jazz activist. You can become one, anybody can become one. If you want to see jazz in your child's school, you have to be a jazz activist. You have to find out where the money is coming from for that education, and tell them you want your child to know something about jazz.

I'm very much interested in education overall. For over twenty-five years I've done programs for assemblies in schools, and at this point I can do them from the kindergarten level to post-university level. But I'd love to see jazz taught in schools more, in grade schools. I'd like to see jazz used to teach history, geography, and certainly culture. That's one of the things that we really need badly in America.

I really love kids and I think they get shortchanged in education. I'm not alone in that thought, but we have to start doing something to correct that. And one of the things that we can do is to make education more entertaining. Introducing Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane in your class wouldn't hurt anything. I'd like to see jazz education as part of the public school curriculum.

Activism is a thread through everything I say and do because there are different ways I've been active. I don't complain because if I see an alternative way, I pursue that. For example, when I was in California I organized a nonprofit organization called the Los Angeles Committee on Jazz. Rather than criticize what [concert promoter] George Wein was doing, or what anybody else was doing, I furnished an alternative. I got the proper papers, applied for a 501 (c) (3) [tax exempt] permit to receive funds and use them, and created over 2,000 jobs in various places – concerts in parks, prisons, orphanages, places where jazz wouldn't ordinarily be. So that was my way. Rather than complaining about how somebody was doing it, become a producer and do it yourself, as you see it should be done, and let the audience decide.

There's a wide enough audience for all of it. You can see how all types of music have survived. Right now we have jazz, bluegrass, rock and roll, gospel, all of that. It's all surviving, and there's an audience for all of it. And I don't deal in numbers. I'd rather have 200 people interested in jazz in a small hall than be in a stadium of 20,000 people. To me, quality of audience is what I prefer, and for the most part jazz audiences are very discerning. They also are very generous, because whatever you want to do, most of the time jazz audiences just ask that you do it well.

I know you also believe that musicians need to be active on their own behalf.

One of the things I'd like to implore musicians to do is to learn how to market themselves better. The reason I'm still out here is that I've learned how to market myself. I do many things. I'm a lecturer, teacher, trombone player, singer, composer, lyricist,

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producer. Last year I produced three recordings – one for myself, one for [pianist] Jane Jarvis, and one for a singer from Japan, Noriko Harada. And all of these things are interesting to me. I enjoy doing them and I do them all with the same fervor. But I've had a little time. I've had seventy-one years to develop all this stuff.

When I do lectures about existing in the business this long, I always owe it to reinventing myself. For some years I was a territory musician, when I worked in Texas with King Kolax. Then in the late '40s, when I became a member of Lionel Hampton's band, I became more of a national musician. When I joined Count Basie's band in 1951, I became an international musician. And then after that I was a Broadway musician. I did Broadway shows for many years. Later I did television with Sammy Davis, Jr., and Merv Griffin. So I just keep reinventing myself in different areas. And it's all related to the music. Everything I've ever done has had a B-flat in it somewhere.

So I am a big advocate of jazz musicians learning to market themselves. I do lecture-demonstrations where I talk and play. But sometimes I do just plain lectures and get a paycheck for that, and then sometimes I do demonstrations and get a paycheck for that, and sometimes I do both and get a paycheck. The reason for that is marketing. For me it's kind of easy to do because I have all these things I'm interested in. I've been able to incorporate all these things in my life and use them.

I am a jazz musician, I guess, in more senses than one, because I use improvisation in my lifestyle. It's not just in my music. Consequently my light bill gets paid and all the rest of it because I'm creative from the musical standpoint, and trying to be as creative as I can possibly be from all standpoints.

I was told a long time ago by the first bandleader I worked for, King Kolax, he said, "Benny, what you have to offer is not a necessity of life. It's not water, food, or air. But once a person is satisfied with all of that, next he needs something for his soul – music, art, so forth. And that's where you come in." But people don't know that. You have to tell them that they need you and then tell them why they need you. They need some music just to keep from going nuts.

That's a good thing to remember, that what we do is not a necessity. So we have to tell the audience how we figure into their lives. And then, when you tell them you are an artist and would like to do a jazz concert, be just that. Be an artist. Be on time, be clean, be responsible. And by all means be true to your art form. Get on the bandstand – or wherever you are – and focus on what you are doing.

Looking back on more than a half-century in music, it's been a good life, hasn't it?

Oh, yeah. Still is. I've been told that if you do something you like in life, you never have a day of work. And I advocate that to kids. When I'm addressing kids in school I say, "Be careful about what you pick as your life's work because you're going to have to spend so much time at it."

You see, music is a great thing because you don't really feel the time that you're putting in. So my point to kids is that whatever your life's work is, pick something that you'll enjoy doing and it will never seem like work. I was, indeed, fortunate to pick playing the trombone, and I look forward to every job. I get as excited about doing a performance in a class as I do about playing in Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall.

You can't imagine having done anything else?

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No, I can't. A brass instrument has been my best friend all through life, and that's my trombone. They say a dog is a man's best friend. My trombone has been my best friend.

So in your case it's not the dog, it's the 'bone.

Touché. [*laughing*] At any rate, the trombone has taken me into fantastic places that I never would have dreamed of. And circumstances keep shifting me along the path I should go. I am doubly blessed to be able to make my livelihood for all this time playing trombone only. I never had any jobs as a waiter, taxi driver, any of that stuff. And this has been one of my most productive years. It's fantastic. I can't believe it myself because I've had a pretty good run, and I keep expecting it to peak and then be on the downhill, but it keeps going up. And I'm more amazed than anybody.

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