

MARSHALL'S ART

Trumpeter John Marshall talks to Mark Gardner

Having learnt his craft, with help from Ornette Coleman and Lonnie Hillyer along the way, trumpeter John Thomas Marshall (born May 22, 1952) went on to work with a succession of big bands led by Buddy Rich, Mel Lewis, Lionel Hampton, Al Porcino, Gerry Mulligan and Dizzy Gillespie. He played in every trumpet chair from fourth to lead, also garnering invaluable small group experience in a group he co-led with pianist Tardo Hammer. A great admirer of Fats Navarro, Kenny Dorham and Dizzy Gillespie, John moved to Europe 17 years ago to become a member of the brass section and featured soloist with the West Deutscher Rundfunk Big Band, based in Cologne. One of the brightest of the contemporary hard bop trumpet voices, he leads his own quintets in Europe and, for a month a year, in New York. He is represented on CD by a series of excellent sessions released on the Organic Music, Blue Jack and Mons labels. A British tour by the cooking quintet he co-leads with Dutch saxophonist Ferdinand Povel is way overdue!

I was born in Wantagh, New York, and raised in Long Island, New York. From the age of eight, my family lived in Lloyd Harbor, Huntington. It was a one hour trip by train or car to New York City, where both of my parents had been born. My father was a saxophone player as well as a music teacher and band director in an elementary school in Merrick, Long Island. His job was to get youngsters started playing instruments at the age of eight or nine. After three years they would move on to junior high school, as we call it in the States. He gave my younger sister and me piano lessons, and would always bring home various band instruments for us to try out. When I was eight years old I took immediately to the trumpet. My high school had an excellent music department. We learnt music, theory and diction, sang in the choir and played in the concert band. My father arranged for me to study privately with Ned Mahoney, an outstanding cornetist and teacher. His mentor had been Ernest Williams, who in turn had studied with the great Herbert Clark, whose books of exercises and etudes are still widely used today. All these men came through the Goldman Band, which was quite an institution for many years, playing the characteristic American concert band repertoire. Ned worked with me on all the basics, getting a nice sound, playing clean and pretty, and trying to make real music out of every phrase. He also pushed me to play longer and longer passages of a piece in one breath, the classic way to develop breath control. I was very lucky to have this good training at such a young age.

Back at the high school our band director was Clem DeRosa, a drummer who

pioneered bringing big band music into the schools. I had the opportunity to play lead trumpet on the classic big band material, like the things Sammy Nestico and Neal Hefti wrote for Basie. At home I remember hearing the Sinatra-Nelson Riddle records as well as various big band things, like Basie and Maynard Ferguson. Although I was a good student and loved to read, from the age of 16 I took less and less interest in my academic studies in favour of music. On my little radio in the evening, when the reception improved, I could listen to WRVR, a jazz station from New York. This was around 1968 or 1969. I would fall asleep at night hearing the latest Blue Note sides by Lee Morgan and others, although it was only later that I

would be able to get my hands on the actual records.

At around this time I began to make weekend excursions into the city with friends to hear concerts at The Fillmore East Auditorium in the Lower East Side. My schoolmates were mostly interested in the biggest rock acts, but I quickly became enamoured with Miles Davis, who had just brought out *Bitch's Brew*, his first thoroughly electric record. I probably saw almost every appearance by Miles in New York City until 1975, after which he didn't perform in public again until 1981. I also began to visit some of the real jazz clubs in New York. I remember seeing Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, Sun Ra, Roland Kirk, Dizzy, and the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Big Band. I regret to this day not having been aware of Kenny Dorham, who was still around at that time, playing great.

After two very brief and half-hearted attempts at further formal education – hardly worth relating here – I landed in New York City. I drove a taxi at night a few times a week and played r&b and salsa gigs. I made the acquaintance of Ornette Coleman, who was very kind and encouraging to me. He invited me to his loft in Soho to play through some of the things he was composing at the time. He actually hired my little group to play as the opening act at a concert in the street-level performance space at 131 Prince Street, called the Artist House. In later years he would call me to play in some of his projects. One interesting experience



Quintet co-leaders, John Marshall and Ferdinand Povel, in Holland, 2005.

not directly related to jazz was a regular Friday and Saturday night engagement with an r&b band in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Actually, I should say, Saturday and Sunday mornings -1 until 5! This was an illegal after-hours dance club, located around the corner from the 521 Club at Fulton and Franklin Streets. When the legal club would have to close at 1am, most of the patrons would go around the corner and upstairs to the after-hours joint, where they would continue dancing in a crowded, sweaty hall until the sun came up. We played a lot of James Brown material and the other things that were hot at the time. This was considerably funkier than any of the tame cover bands I had worked with in Long Island. When the groove was hot and the dance floor was full, the leader would extend the vamps for sax and trumpet solos. I learned to edit all the fluff out of my playing and go for the rhythmic essentials, so to speak. In retrospect, this was also good training. We earned 25 dollars per night.

Finally, around 1975, with the help of an unemployment benefit claim, which I managed to extend to a year, I disentangled myself from non-musical work long enough to hole up in my East 13th Street apartment and seriously study my heroes' recordings. By now these were Charlie Parker, Fats Navarro, Sonny Rollins, Kenny Dorham and, of course, Dizzy. I would transcribe their solos with the help of a turntable which had a half-speed setting of 16 rpm. Concurrently with all this practising and transcribing, I began to connect with some real Bebop players, I would sit in with saxophonist Clifford Jordan, pianists such as Duke Jordan and Walter Davis Jr. and drummers Joe Jones Jr and Jimmy Lovelace. Playing with real Bebop drummers like these last two was especially revelatory. I began to study privately with trumpeter Lonnie Hillyer, a great talent and fine pianist as well, and one of the very few trumpeters who was able to integrate Dizzy's rhythmic and harmonic sophistication into his style. He



Three trumpet generations: John Marshall (born 1952), Mario Bauza (1911), Dizzy Gillespie (1917) pictured when the Bauza band played for Dizzy's 80th birthday, April 27, 1991.

had moved from Detroit to New York in 1960 along with Charles McPherson and the great Barry Harris. He was a close musical associate of Barry and along with Charles, a veteran of what was perhaps Charlie Mingus's finest group. Lonnie's playing on recordings by Harris and Mingus is well worth checking out. He knew the music of Charlie Parker, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk inside and out, and could demonstrate all of it on the piano or trumpet. He would comp for me at the piano and let me know in no uncertain terms where my phrases blathered on too long. He advised me to always think in terms of phrases. Phrases should have a beginning and an end. They have a natural length, often two or four bars. When I listen today to Bud Powell's greatest recordings, I am reminded of how valid this is. Another trumpeter, Tommy Turrentine, was a good friend of Lonnie's, and I also got a chance to get to know him and play with him. He took me to his place and played piano for me and we

would trade fours on Bud Powell tunes. He was a true Bebopper. Tommy also had an ascerbic wit and didn't suffer fools gladly.

In October of 1976 I was called to join Buddy Rich's big band. This meant steady employment and the chance to associate with some very fine young players. It was also a crash course in sight-reading and professionalism in general. What I mean is, one could be fired and sent home at any moment for not summoning the required concentration for the task at hand. A sink-or-swim situation. The band was quite amplified, with everyone playing into a mic and many of the charts were rock-oriented, but it was nevertheless a fantastic experience. We travelled to nearly every state in the USA as well as to Europe and Japan. I stayed for almost two years, and later would go with the band for a few weeks or months now and then. It's unfortunate that the famous 'bus tapes' of Buddy chewing out the band have so greatly coloured the memory of this extraordinary musician and individual. I will only say that there were many other bandleaders who could be far crueller (and cheaper) than Buddy. What he could do with the drums will, of course, never be equalled any more than Maynard Ferguson's playing ever will be. At least twice we played on a double bill with Maynard's band at big concerts. Both bands really turned up the heat on those nights.

In 1978 I heard the 10-piece group that Tom Harrell co-led with Sam Jones. My former room-mate from Buddy's band, Bob Mintzer, was playing with the group. After hearing Tom's incredible playing with that group, I felt the need to get off the road and study further. I quit Buddy's band and a few months later joined Mel Lewis's band, playing fourth trumpet, right after the ill-fated 10-week tour when Thad Jones's lip was injured and he



Hanging out with Woody Shaw, John Marshall pictured on Christmas Eve, 1980.

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elected to stay in Europe. Mel kept the band going and expanded the book with new charts from Bob Brookmeyer and others. We did tours, but not steadily like Buddy's band. To have played, night after night, next to these two greats rather spoilt me as far as jazz drumming is concerned. They had very contrasting approaches but were actually crazy about each other's playing. For about a year and a half, Tom Harrell was in Mel's trumpet section. To hear him week after week was quite amazing. Another great benefit of playing the Monday nights at the Village Vanguard was gaining free entry to hear all the greats who played the Vanguard the rest of the week. On Monday nights many of them would come to the Vanguard to hear the big band, and I got to know and even sit in with some of them, like Woody Shaw and Chet Baker. Another giant who I had the chance to sit in with around that time, although not at the Vanguard, was Sonny Stitt, who was very encouraging to me. Although all these guys are gone, their spirits have stayed with me.

Also in 1979 I began playing with Lionel Hampton, but on lead trumpet rather than fourth trumpet. When Hamp travelled to Europe, the band was quite different. He jettisoned many of the younger guys who played with him in the States, and the band was stocked with jazz legends, partly because George Wein's powerful Festival Productions booking agency became the paymaster, rather than Hamp's unsavoury manager. Lionel often took me along as a lead/jazz player, and I found myself working alongside guys like Curtis Fuller, Cat Anderson, Frankie Dunlop, Teddy Wilson, Arnett Cobb and Doc Cheatham, to mention only a few. Playing lead trumpet when Frankie Dunlop was on drums was a special thrill. I remember relishing over breakfast Doc Cheatham's tales of the 1920s, when gangsters ran most of the clubs. This was



The Bopera House Quintet of 1988: Back row (from left) – Tardo Hammer, John Webber, Tom Melito. Front – Ralph Lalama, John Marshall.

the era of prohibition, when all alcoholic beverages stronger than watery beer were illegal. So-called bootleggers provided whisky and everything else to the speakeasies, as the forbidden but widespread drinking establishments were called. Doc spoke of the bountiful amount of employment that was available to jazz musicians in that era.

From 1979 until 1981 I studied with the world-famous brass teacher Carmine Caruso, a true genius at helping players build their command of their instruments. He would custom-prescribe exercises to the student and, observing his or her progress, gradually increase the demand to build chops. I and countless other brass players still employ his exercises every day. In 1982 I was touring Europe with Hamp, and in Nice met Claudine, a French lady who was shortly to become my wife. The following year she moved to Brooklyn and I resolved to find ways to work more in New York and spend less time on the road. This meant doing more

commercial work, such as studio recording, substituting on Broadway shows, weddings, galas etc, but staying in the city made it easier to pursue playing jazz in quartet and quintet formations. In the 1980s I did some work with Gerry Mulligan's big band, Al Porcino's big band (playing most of the lead) as well as with Afro-Cuban jazz pioneer Mario Bauza. In the late 1980s pianist Tardo Hammer and I co-led the quintet The Bopera House. Ralph Lalama played tenor sax, with John Webber (bass) and Tom Leito (drums). We recorded an album, and over the years I've continued to perform and record with Tardo whenever possible.

In July 1988 I toured with Dizzy Gillespie's big band. We played three festival appearances in the States and three weeks of festivals in Europe. This was the last year Dizzy took a classic big band on the road. Some of the arrangements, like *Round Midnight*, were his. The following year he began touring with the United Nations Orchestra, a smaller group playing largely Latin-flavoured numbers. He was extremely open and generous with his knowledge, and a joy to be around. I wish now that I had asked him more questions about various things that summer, but I was very much in awe of him, even though he was quite approachable.

In 1991 I became aware of the WDR radio-television big band, based in Cologne, Germany. Mel Lewis had often guested with the band, as had Dennis Makrell, after Mel became ill. The trumpeter Jon Eardley, known partly for being Chet Baker's successor in Gerry Mulligan's group, was in the WDR band, and passed away suddenly early in 1991. Dennis advised me that the WDR band would be looking for a jazz trumpeter willing to re-locate to Cologne. Although I was quite busy in New York, a realistic



John Marshall (left) was encouraged when he sat in with Sonny Stitt in Miami, January, 1978. Also in the jam were John Mosca and Gary Pribek.

appraisal of the pathetic state of pensions and health care in the States made this seem like an attractive alternative. I played a few projects with the band in 1991 and was offered the job. I moved to Cologne with my wife in January 1992 and have lived there since then. The band works about 200 days a year, and does some touring but not too much. Many days the job consists of daytime rehearsals and recording, with a typical project running two weeks and culminating in two or three concerts. In the early 1990s people like Bill Holman, Bob Brookmeyer, Bob Mintzer, Jim McNeely and others were some of the specially invited guests. Since 2003 Michael Abene, the marvellous arranger, is our part-time bandleader and arranger. He was only 19 when he started playing piano for Maynard Ferguson way back in 1961, and since then has played with and arranged for a long list of jazz greats. The big band works about 75 days a year with him. Some recent WDR Big Band CD collaborations that have been well received included *Skunk Funk* with Randy and Michael Brecker, which won a Grammy, *Brown Street*, with Joe Zawinul, *Roots And Grooves* with Maceo Parker, and *Avant Gershwin* with Patty Austin which also won a Grammy.

I am generally in New York for two weeks around New Year and two weeks in the summer, to play (usually at Small's, lately with tenor saxophonist Grant Stewart), and sometimes to record. The rhythm sections in New York are still hard to beat. In Europe I lead my own quintet, together with the great tenor saxophonist, Ferdinand Povel. He is a little older than me, and a professor at the Amsterdam Music Conservatory. Ferdinand is held in very high regard throughout Europe and is something like a godfather to many younger saxophonists in Holland and Germany. We try to play together as much as we can around Europe.

I still practice as much as time allows, because the trumpet demands it, but also because I enjoy it greatly. I suppose my greatest influences on the trumpet remain Fats Navarro, for his perfect, swinging phrases and unerring good taste, Kenny Dorham, the poet of the trumpet, Dizzy, whose contributions to modern music are obvious, Lonnie Hillyer, who guided me in the right direction years ago, and Tom Harrell, a genuine genius in his playing and composing. On saxophone, Charlie Parker and Sonny Rollins are big influences. I also listen a great deal to singers, especially when I'm learning a song. Frank Sinatra and Sarah Vaughan are two personal favourites. Two of my favourite jazz composers would be Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell. I'm always trying to learn more songs and tunes and incorporate them into my repertoire. One thing I work on is playing tunes I like in the more difficult keys I can find. If I were to presume to advise young players in their exploration of the music, I would counsel them to approach it with the greatest



A festival tour with Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band in July 1988 was a musical highlight for John Marshall, snapped here after the final concert in San Sebastian, Spain.

respect and understand that it is an infinite and lifelong undertaking. To not try to run before you can walk, that is to say, to first do your best to master your instrument and the music, with all that entails. To not spread yourself too thin. To not worry about innovating or being eclectic until much later in your journey. To simply follow your heart and begin with just one player who truly moves you and totally

immerse yourself in his (or her) music, studying it deeply. After all, being original only requires that you be yourself, for no two of us are the same. He who claims at an early age to be into all styles of music is almost certainly spinning his wheels. Remember that all great players were already deeply versed in the music of their forebears before they created the music for which we love them.

JOHN MARSHALL ON CD

As leader or co-leader:

Bopera House (VSOP 72),
Keep On Keepin' On (Mons MR874 774),
Dreamin' On The Hudson (Organic Music ORGM 9713),
Theme Of No Repeat (Organic Music ORGM 9719),
Frisky (Organic Music ORGM 9738),
Live At Le Pirate (Organic Music ORGM 9750),
Marshall Arts (Blue Jack BJJR047).

As a sideman:

American - Dutch All Stars (Blue Jack BJJR014)
Eric Doelman 7tet/Why Shouldn't I

(Blue Jack BJJR034),

Rein Der Graaff/Blue Lights (Blue Jack BJJR042),
Rob Agerbeek/Almost Blue (Blue Jack BJJR038).

With the WDR Big Band:

Some Skunk Funk (BHM 1004-2, Grammy Winner),
Brown Street (INT 3450 2),
Roots And Grooves (INT 34132),
Patty Austin/Avant Gershwin (Reservoir REN 51232 Grammy Winner).

For more information on John Marshall, his career and recordings contact: marshallbop.com



John Marshall's New York quintet pictured during their gig at Small's Jazz Club in August 2008. From left: Neal Miner, Grant Stewart, John Marshall, Tardo Hammer, Leroy Williams.