An Interview with Bill Watrous

Wigan Jazz Festival, July 1996

I was pleased to catch Bill Watrous during his UK visit in July 1996 prior to his appearance at the Wigan Jazz Festival with the Wigan Youth Jazz Orchestra. It was his first visit to the U.K. for around 14 years and he was sad that it had been so long. Bill was genuinely pleased to discuss various aspects of his playing for the British Trombone Society Magazine *The Trombonist* and hopes it isn't long before he returns to the UK again.

**On warming up**

I have a fairly set approach when I'm preparing to play which is probably quite different from the way most people have been taught to set-up. I have a starting point that is totally different from most people. I start above the staff around F and G and my goal is to produce good tone without any effort or stress of any kind - no pinching or squeezing down - just make the embouchure vibrate naturally, easily and comfortably in order to produce the sound I want. I aim for an open, relaxed delivery and I don't ever want to feel tense or "bound up". I have been doing this most of my playing life but it took me a long time to figure out exactly what I was doing and how important it was.

**On embouchure**

Around the last time I came to England I remember I was having some trouble with my embouchure and I was unable to pinpoint the problem. There was something not right and I had allowed myself to drift a little off the mark. There is an embouchure setting where you can place the mouthpiece and everything will work without changing or moving about. We are bound and determined to find that spot and a lot of players get in trouble because they cannot find that spot. In my case I was drifting from that spot. The spot doesn't have to be in the exact centre of the mouth, and that is the point. One of the problems we face as brass musicians is that when we play our instrument we are all experimenting with the best way to go about playing for the individual. I'm referring to the direction of the air and the way in which the instrument receives that air. The most relaxed fashion is probably the best way as generally nothing is accomplished by force. If you're able to produce a comfortable sound quietly you can with a little more effort, a greater volume of air and perhaps a larger instrument easily produce the required higher volume. Of course, setting up to produce a relaxed sound is an exercise really, because when we are all actually performing there is more natural energy always projected. When we tire, the instant reaction is to lean the instrument closer to the face. Everyone reaches this state, and I was close to that point at the Bull's Head in Barnes last week. I was using
much more pressure than I wanted to in order to make it happen due to being so physically exhausted. Sometimes the situations dictate that you have to "dig down" and force things to happen. The important point is that when you have time you should concentrate on centreing everything and making things work the way they should. Over the years I've discovered that there is an "anchor lip" and a control lip for the embouchure. I have more upper lip than lower lip in the mouthpiece. The lower lip is the anchor lip and the upper lip gives me the range control. When I find things going awry I can go back to that "ground zero" point, and find where the centre is again.

On fast playing

One aspect of my performance is the fast playing, but I concentrate more on the lyrical playing. However, I always wanted to be able to play like people such as Charlie Parker and Clifford Brown who all could articulate impeccably and with such dexterity. I thought that it would be great if I could emulate that style and I just experimented until I played the notes smoothly and cleanly rather than just "splashing around" which is something I don't find attractive.

On sound

Sound production is one of my chief concerns whether I'm playing a fast piece, a ballad or the blues. One of the best compliments that ever came my way from a young age was that my sound was good. My father was a trombone player who was noted for a gorgeous tone, and I think I was innately conscious of this and it wore off on me in time.

On breathing

I try to not throw myself into a state of frenzy when I take a breath. I take a full breath and I deliver it as directly as possible. I try and control it at the embouchure level rather than the throat level. Circular breathing is very effective at certain times and it is great to be able to extend a phrase beyond the norm. Other instruments such as the piano and stringed instruments can extend and play phrases of indeterminate length, and it is nice to be able to do this on a brass instrument as well. Circular breathing comes upon me at certain times. I'm always thinking about four bars ahead and deciding where I want to go and use whatever is necessary to get there.

On British Big Bands

If I remember correctly the standard of British big bands and players was wonderful the first time I came over here and it is every bit as effective now. I found the BBC Big Band was just excellent during our radio recording session last week. Right down the line they were very professional, right on the ball and swung like crazy! Also, the Midlands Youth Jazz Orchestra from Birmingham was one of the best bands I have ever played with - just fabulous. Some marvellous players, great ensemble work and they really swung too.
On the future

I'm pleased to say that I have been having some moderate success as a vocalist lately. I've always admired Chet Baker and I would like to do an album of a collection of his work featuring both the trombone and vocals. It has been a dream of mine to do this and in the future maybe I will emerge as being better known for my vocals than my trombone playing. Stranger things have happened in music - who knows? I've also had some success as a jazz whistler. I used this on the Reflections album of whistling in unison with my playing. Recently I've used a gadget to sample my whistle and use a midi unit to track my playing - it is a gimmick and I don't know how far one should go with it. I certainly don't want it to be the one thing I'm remembered for!

Dave Stevens