

# Marcus Reynolds in conversation with Chris Jeans



**C.J.** So Marcus, it's been pretty hectic for you over the last couple of years. Solo concerts in Spain, albums, Musical Director of two big bands, lecturing in brass tuition and embouchure, recently being assigned as an artist and clinician for Michael Rath Brass Instruments and I gather that you're off to the States in a couple of months. How do you manage to pack it all in and how did you find yourself on this rollercoaster?

**M.R.** Well, I suppose I have to thank the family doctor. I was about 11 years old at the time, suffering from asthma and he told my Dad to get me a trumpet. Blowing it would help my condition. But typical of Dad he gave me a trombone instead. He was a fan of Chris Barber. So just blowing down it to exercise the lungs making no sound at all was how I started. Just a lot of huffing and puffing. Various teachers playing every instrument except the trombone came and went until Major J.E. Thirtle, late of the Blues and Royals arrived on the scene. He advised that I could learn to play in the Army and inspired me to become a boy bandsman. So Army service commenced followed by a scholarship at Kneller Hall. Next stop was a year's active service in Northern Ireland during which time the asthma got worse and I was eventually released on medical grounds. Six weeks later, finding myself in Civvy Street, I went pro with the Ken Mackintosh Orchestra and was now based in London playing on recording sessions, the first of which was at the famous BBC Maida Vale Studios. Many gigs, advertising jingles, West End productions, Radio and TV work came from this association. I was a very busy back roomer playing alongside the likes of Trevor Horn as well as teaching for Surrey County Council for twelve years.

**C.J.** I read in an article that you had suffered an accident a few years back and that you had to resign from your professional playing work. What happened?

**M.R.** Well Chris, put simply, I fell off stage. I was on a raised platform 12 feet above the stage, leaned back in my chair and lost balance. No safety rail and fell over the back of the stage and landed on my trombone, shattering my mouth, and wound up unconscious in hospital. After some serious reconstructive surgery and once my lips had healed, plus a lot of persistence, I found five notes that I could play. That was the start of getting me back

**"One of the finest trombonists I've ever heard"**

**Paul Tanner - Trombonist with Glenn Miller**

on track. I played care homes/weddings/schools and hospitals to help aid my recovery, but the accident had affected my memory and my ability to read just wasn't the same.



Marcus Reynolds.

**C.J.** You must have been devastated. What did you do?

**M.R.** To be honest, at one time I was so low that I seriously considered the most drastic of actions, but then I had a young family and with their support I gradually got my confidence back and I set about re-learning the instrument. After all, 20 years of playing music was all that I knew. I had no choice but to start all over again and develop a style that suited my abilities. The hardest thing for me was turning down work that came my way from well meaning colleagues because I knew that I wasn't ready for the punishment of gigs let alone any session work. I realised that I had to take my time and get my prowess back on my own terms even if it meant that I had to busk on the streets until I felt

I was ready. And that's exactly what I ended up doing for more or less 15 years and God knows I've taken a lot of flack for it since, but you know what, I was blowing the instrument every day and it's turned out to be the foundation of what I'm able to do today.

**C.J.** With all your contacts what were the options?

**M.R.** Well, I had received offers to direct nationally known bands, but I consider myself first and foremost to be a trombonist. I'd been used to playing a couple of solos when I had directed bands before, as part of the programme, but as Ian Bousfield recently said in a magazine article, 'don't do things for others, be true to yourself'. So the prospect of just being a musical director - to quote the above - just didn't feel that I was being true to myself.

**C.J.** But there are a lot of conductors/musical directors out there that don't play!

**M.R.** Yeah, I know where you're coming from, but that wouldn't have been enough for me. Don't forget, I wanted to keep playing but I just wasn't confident that I would be able to keep pace with the section.

**C.J.** With the career that many brass players dream about, coming to an end so abruptly...any bitterness?

**M.R.** Oh, at first, loads of it - directed at the people I was surrounded by at the time. However, my brother Kimble reminded me that 'love has to be given away but hate

remains with you and it will only bite you back'.

**C.J.** ....err very true, very true - so what did you do?

**M.R.** Spiritually, mentally and physically I forgave everyone and I immediately felt better.

**C.J.** How did you go about rebuilding your embouchure?

**M.R.** You know it's curious, but whilst I was teaching prior to the accident I had always had ideas for the embouchure and its adjustment.

**C.J.** Adjustment? Such as?

**M.R.** I don't always think that it's necessary to completely overhaul one's lip musculature. Sometimes all that's really needed is a tweak. Particularly with

younger players for example. Such as too many sharing one music stand can lead to offset mouthpiece alignment, which results in pitch distortion. Gentle muscle exercises can provide an improvement. I even came up with a gadget to stimulate the blood-flow in the chops. There is now a Vibrass marketed by Denis Wick, so you could use that.

**C.J.** So what did you do exactly? I mean, the tone that you've developed as a result of learning all over again is pretty individual. There is some really great playing on your albums and I'm curious to know how you arrived at your 'new' sound.

**M.R.** Well I knew that I would never regain the exact sound and tone that I had prior to the accident so I went back to the basics as I did when I was a student. Listening to great artists. The only difference now was that I knew the size of the job ahead and the amount of work that I would need to put in. I became my own student if you like. I was listening to Sinatra, Bennett, Caruso and I also found inspiration in Edith Piaf whose voice is filled with the raw emotion of surviving life on the streets. Something about the timbre of their voices struck a chord with me and I tried to weave their influences into my existing passions for Dorsey, Rosolino and Dick Nash as well as a dash of Streisand. I wanted to come up with a sound that would really generate an emotional response and draw the audience in to the melody. One memorable day I even got a hug of approval from the legend that is Rico Rodriguez on a rainy day in a Swansea shopping centre! What a surprise! You know something, since Dorsey no one has really featured the trombone as a solo instrument - by that I mean playing in a lyrical manner as if the instrument was singing. I guess in a naive sort of way I wanted to pick up where he had left off.

**C.J.** So what came first, Re-discovering the technique or the embouchure?

**M.R.** When I say I had to learn all over again, I mean exactly that. Scales, ear training, muscle memory, breathing, embouchure. Everything. I'm passionate about learning. I don't think it's something that you ever stop doing. Even on a gig in Spain a couple of years ago a friend introduced me to the great Gordon Higginbottom and he kindly gave me a lesson on double and triple tonguing. Of all the villas in Spain he had to walk into mine! I can't tell you how much it does for your self-confidence when a guy like that



Marcus Reynolds, Geoff Hull and John Hutchings performing in Spain.

confirms that you are back on track. You know something Chris, no matter where you are in your career or abilities you can always learn from someone else. Now that I have a base in Leicestershire I'm extremely fortunate to have a brilliant lady on the team called Anne. She coordinates all my students, gigs, clinics, workshops and travel as well as making sure that I've got the right trombone, the right music and the right address. I'm called on regularly to help others with their embouchure problems and in extreme cases such as Bell's palsy it's not unheard of for me to drive four hours to share my knowledge and help fellow brass players get back on track. It's been incredibly rewarding to see the results.

**C.J.** So what is the right trombone for you at the moment?

**M.R.** At the moment I'm playing a Rath silver nickel "R10" which I love playing. I had known Mick Rath for ages as he had repaired my trombone and maintained my slides over the years. Not surprisingly he was the first person I felt I could trust to help me with my playing problems as a result of my accident. My lips weren't allowing me to produce a sufficient volume of air and I was looking for a very easy blowing instrument. Mick and Chris Beaumont put their heads together with their manufacturing team and after trying many combinations of bells, leadpipes, slides etc they came up with the "R1" that was great. I must say that these guys were extremely patient and supportive throughout the process and I'm really grateful to them. After a couple of years I found that I was able to play an "R10". Then I needed some bottom end without having a large bore bass, so added to the collection was a Bb /F Tenor "R1" which Raths' made especially for me. For the bigger sound needed for orchestral work I have an "R2"

**C.J.** And what mouthpiece do you use?

**M.R.** I'm using a Giardinelli 5D screw rim,

sometimes with a 6 top.

**C.J.** So you mentioned earlier about your Spanish concerts? Tell me more...

**M.R.** I was performing in Royal Tunbridge Wells, when a guy called John Hutchings said that he also played the Trombone and asked if I could help him with his playing and embouchure and he would put me up for the week. I said: "I can't afford to be in one place for a week." He then paused and said: "It's Alicante." I smiled and said: "I may just have a window." Through this association, I have now performed two big concerts in Spain with a large ladies

choir - that's the amount of people, you understand, not the size of the ladies.

**C.J.** Any outstanding brass students, Marcus?

**M.R.** Oh yes, I see Lee Hallam popping up with various Big Bands as featured soloist. And helping out with Grimethorpe Colliery Band. He also teaches trombone at Salford University and now his Jazz JnK duet sessions with Richard Baker (tribute to JJ Johnson and Kai Winding) are really taking off - and I have to say I'm really proud of him and all that he has achieved. Indeed, it's great to see any pupil who you've worked with do so well.

**C.J.** Do you remember his first lesson?

**M.R.** I do Chris, (pause). I showed him why he should never trust a slide-lock and then said: "all I'm going to show you now is how to add air." We still laugh about it when we meet; needless to say he's still adding air and a nice career to boot.

**C.J.** How are you with the new technology?

**M.R.** Chris, you're talking to one of the world's biggest reformed technophobes with a capital T. I used to have a major fear of computers and left all of that digital stuff to the engineers, but believe me after the right instruction and with a few choice applications I've found it makes all the difference to the job we all have to do. Take "Transcribe" as one example. This little beauty lets you record a sample of a phrase from any track and then really mess it around so that you can learn it inside out. You can loop it, slow it down, transpose it and edit the frequencies, all of which really helps you get to grips with any lick under the sun. Just imagine taking a Louis Armstrong track or a Bill Watrous track and really picking it apart to understand the genius of their phrasing. There's no excuse nowadays. Everyone can be a virtuoso!

**C.J.** You mean to say that we can all be Christian Lindbergs?

**M.R.** Well maybe not all of us, but we can

get a good part of the way there just by changing our current routine. Not always treading the familiar path to us. I'm sure you appreciate that playing unfamiliar pieces can stretch your abilities. In the same way, some unfamiliar lip exercises can work too. I'll give you an example. One way of making that instrument an essential part of you, a sort of extension if you like, is to keep the buzzing going. As a morning routine I buzz a couple of scales very lightly on a 12c Kelly plastic mouthpiece and I also do a tiny bit of tonguing to give the lips a gentle wake up call. The effect of this is to physiologically remind the lips and brain that this is what we do! So, when you eventually get to pick up the instrument you feel as if you've only had a short rest from it, not hours. Another invaluable piece of preparation to be able to increase your range is to whistle the note you want to play and feel what the tongue does in the oral chamber. Practice whistling high notes and low notes and even have a go at trying to get extreme high notes. Whistle a scale from the lowest note that you can



**Marcus Reynolds performing solo.**

manage and take note of what is happening to your tongue. Now pick up the instrument and try the same approach. You will find that this has helped you to focus the air column and you'll get a cleaner attack.

**C.J.** *All in all it's quite some renaissance! What do you suggest to bring more brass players to the solo concert platform?*

**M.R.** Well, organise your own events. Don't wait for others to ask you. Meet your local organist, at the church or chapel. Practice two or three popular numbers and learn to play them from the heart, give the head a rest.

**C.J.** *Who has encouraged you to perform solo?*

**M.R.** Well, Don Lusher on hearing my album 'Homage' wrote me a letter saying 'congratulations on bringing the Trombone to the people'. Last year Pete King, a promoter who organised one of my gigs sent a copy of my CD "Here There and Everywhere" to Paul Tanner and he came back with a wonderful quote making all my efforts feel truly rewarded as well as a signed copy of his fantastic book "Practice with the Experts" - one of only three

copies left.

**C.J.** *Phew quite a remarkable story. Thank you very much Marcus for your time.*

**M.R.** Thank you, Chris. I'm so honoured to meet you and I hope that some of my ramblings here will have inspired the readers of *The Brass Herald*.

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