

## Trumpets at the Movies

**Tom Watson of Prozone Music talks to Malcolm McNab, one of Hollywood's elite trumpet players.**

For many players around the world, some of the most inspiring brass playing can be found in Hollywood movies. Iconic trumpet solos such as Dances with Wolves, Star Trek Deep Space 9, Crimson Tide, Con Air, The Rock, Air Force One, L.A. Confidential, Independence Day, The Last Castle and spine tingling lead trumpet lines from E.T., Star Trek (1 – 6), Jaws, Jurassic Park, Wyatt Earp, First Knight, Men in Black, 101 Dalmatians, Batman and Robin, Coming to America, Liar Liar - to name just the tip of a 2000 movie title iceberg - were and continue to be the staples of commercial listening for brass players and movie lovers globally. Malcolm McNab is the man that has lived out many trumpet players dreams. He's the one that played them all. As if this wasn't enough, he still manages to find time to feature widely as a soloist and guest principle in many of America's top orchestras. Here he talks to Tom Watson of Prozone Music about his life and career in Hollywood, how he stays on top of his game in what has to be the most pressurised studios in the world and also tells us about his latest work, his astonishing new solo CD entitled 'EXQUISITE - The artistry of Malcolm McNab'.

**T.W.** Hi Malcolm, thanks a lot for taking the time to chat to me. Your playing is such an inspiration to others, where did you get your first inspirations from? Where did it all begin?

**M.M.** I first heard my father, Boyd playing a trumpet around the house. I really wanted to do that also and at age nine started lessons in school.

**T.W.** You studied with James Stamp and William Vacchiano. Many players will be familiar with their methods. How did you find learning directly from these technicians and do you still employ their methods today?

**M.M.** Jimmy Stamp and Bill Vacchiano were both great teachers. Bill was a great orchestral player and really knew how to prepare a student to do exactly that. I spent only a year or so studying with him when I was stationed at West Point in New York. He assigned tons of studies and never once asked to hear any of them again. I know that if you had practiced everything he assigned, the way he prescribed it, then you would be totally prepared as an orchestral trumpet player.

Jimmy, on the other hand, focused mostly on the very basics of tone production and offered many exercises, mostly never written out, inspired by a bit of Schlossberg, Shubruok, Cecil Read, et al. The emphasis was always on pitch centre and getting from note to note properly and cleanly. I imagine that they both taught trumpet for at least 60-70 years of their lives. That is a lot of experience in dealing with every kind of player and their problems and then coming up with the solutions. I like to call Stamp's method the 'discovery method'. He was most happy when he didn't have to talk about it very much but got you to 'discover' the proper feeling while playing. Since I started with Jimmy in 1960, I have been practicing as he prescribed for 48 of my 65 years.



**Malcolm McNab.**

**T.W.** After a period of touring and orchestral work elsewhere in the US, you returned to LA in 1969 where your recording career really took off. What was life in Hollywood like for a session player at this time?

**M.M.** When I returned to Los Angeles in 1969, there wasn't much work for me for a few years. Eventually, I became a pretty busy free lance player, playing many different musical gigs. There was a lot of TV film scoring work, with many of the regular shows using 30 to 40 piece orchestras. I was also involved with opera, symphony, ballet, and musicals. In the 1970s there was so much episodic television with new underscoring for each

show, that it wasn't unusual to have to turn down two or three other jobs for each day I had work. Universal alone had 20 to 30 regular shows using orchestras. In addition, I was in the theatre orchestra pits, playing as many as eight shows a week. This was all pretty exhausting. I did the Schubert Theatre for at least five years solid (1972-1977). At some point later, I decided to limit my work to recording only. I had been trying for years to find time to do some solo recording. Even as the studio business gradually de-centralized and there were a lot less sessions in LA, I was still unable to get anything done towards that goal of a solo recording. I feel very fortunate that now, with the release of my very first solo CD "EXQUISITE - The Artistry of Malcolm McNab", my goal was finally reached. Better late than never!

**T.W.** You were kind enough to welcome me and my family into your home some years ago. My brother Will and I were blown away with our day in the LA lifestyle. We experienced your wonderful house and gardens, pools, cars, etc. BH readers would love to know what life is like for Hollywood's elite musicians. Can you give us an idea of a typical week for Malcolm McNab?

**M.M.** I don't really know if there is a typical week for M.M. These days, I could work a week to ten days in a row, but that might only happen once or twice a year. A lot of the time it can average two or three days a week. Last February we scored Indiana Jones 4 with John Williams for nine days, over a period of a month or so, working no more than two or three days a week. I try to use my other time to practice and record for my next CD project.

**T.W.** Over the years you have worked with some massive names and rubbed shoulders with many famous stars. Endorsements include: Aaron Copland - "You can play the trumpet like very few.....very few". Jerry Goldsmith - "He is my principle trumpet in everything I do". (John Williams describes McNab as "Brilliant".) With glowing accolades from such a gallery of greats, are there any moments in your career that you hold dear or have thought "wow.....I've made it"?

**M.M.** I'm extremely fortunate to be able to make my living and my way in life, doing what I have always been doing for 56 years of my life. I have been so blessed to have been associated with the many great musicians and composers of 'Hollywood' over the past almost 40 years. The treasured moments and the accolades are so numerous and in all fairness, to omit



**Malcolm McNab with Gerhard Meinl in the B & S bell department.**

someone or something and to get some people upset about it in any way, in a business I am still actively engaged in, is not my idea of a very good career move. There have been many thrilling moments for me. You mention my endorsers. Of course, working with Jerry, John, and - I better call him Mr Copland, since I only worked with him the one time - has been a great honour and to have had the opportunity to make music with these great people and many others has been my good fortune.

**T.W.** In London, I'm sure that many musicians would agree that the music business has and is changing in some ways for the better and some ways for the worse. Has life changed in the LA scene over the years?

**M.M.** I would imagine that the changes in the business in LA are quite similar to those in London. One of the main reasons, I think, is that most likely the decentralization of the recording business has cut into our work quite a bit. Recording happens all over the place and every city with a good symphony orchestra has qualified musicians. We cannot really compete economically with most of these places in the world. The result - not good - less work for LA (and London) musicians. On the flip side, the same changes in technology and affordability that have changed the commercial music business have also given more musicians a chance to be independent of big record companies and to be able to produce their own recordings.

**T.W.** As more and more players seem to try to diversify and cross over genres, do you think that this is an important skill for recording musicians, or should they try not to become 'Jack of all trades'?

**M.M.** I believe that having experience

playing every kind of music is an important prerequisite for this field of work. Of course, this is particularly true in film and television scoring. It would not be unusual to be expected to know how to play everything at sight, from dramatic underscoring (mostly symphonic) to any style of pop music, opera, symphonic, ballet, etc. Source music, the music in the background in a theatre, restaurant, elevator, radio, TV, etc., is usually all recorded on the same sessions by the same musicians. So, the more versatility in all styles of playing, the better!

**T.W.** What is your advice for young players wishing to enter the music business as a brass player today?

**M.M.** Have an alternate plan ready to go. Earning a living just from playing, without a regular job, can be brutal. Be prepared to possibly supplement playing with teaching, copying, etc. - if necessary. There are really no guarantees in music as a business. The only guarantee available is the love of music itself - there you go. If you can make your living playing your instrument, you're indeed fortunate. Being prepared, especially when the opportunity arises for you to be heard, is important. Whenever preparedness and opportunity meet, some great advancement is possible. Stay in shape. Be prepared.

**T.W.** So getting "trumpetty" for a minute, do you have any practise or lifestyle techniques that you use in order to stay at the very top of your game?

**M.M.** Staying in shape as a free lance studio player is certainly a big challenge. You seldom know what you will have to play before getting to the job. You never know what might come up. Can you imagine playing an all day recording session and then hearing at the end of the day that we have to record eight or nine marches with all repeats and sound like a mediocre school band on a parade field? That can feel like a brick in the mouth, especially if your chops are not in top shape. On the other hand, maybe there is not enough to play to keep your chops for an entire week of sessions. You know you have to go home every night and practice.

**T.W.** So how do you maintain this strength etc?

**M.M.** What do I practice? Mouthpiece buzzing exercises, flexibility exercises, long tones. What do I spend the most time on? The very BASICS of tone production. Our foundation. Our architecture. Without staying in touch with your basics on a daily basis, you're risking having that musical rug pulled out from under you at any time. That is, any skill involved in playing the trumpet - range, technique, extreme volume, is absolutely no good to you if your basics let you down. No good if it doesn't work when you need it. When they want

you to do it! If you don't know exactly how you put it together every day, you certainly won't know where to start if it suddenly lets you down.

**T.W.** I remember that you had a trumpet rack in your pick up truck, with a trumpet in every key and for every occasion. What is your most favoured kit for a day in the studio?

**M.M.** I carry two or three multi cases with me to sessions. Case 1 - Bb, C Eb, piccolo in Bb with A slide. Case 2 - Bb cornet, flugelhorn, D bell and slides. Case 3 - Eb cornet, E-F-G trumpet with 4 bells. I mostly go with cases 1 & 2 unless there is something specialized or extreme high cornet parts

**T.W.** So, moving on to your new CD - "EXQUISITE - The artistry of Malcolm McNab". You recorded the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto .....on the trumpet! Can you tell us what made this a choice to record?

**M.M.** It certainly wasn't my idea! In 1978 I got a call from James Conkling, who was a producer and business man for the likes of Nat King Cole, Stan Kenton and Leonard Bernstein. He had the idea that a recording of the concerto branded 'unplayable' by many violinists on the trumpet would sell well, as there were already hundreds of recordings of violinists playing it. I believe that the first trumpet player that he approached about playing the Tchaikovsky was Maynard Ferguson, who expressed no interest. After this he called his friend Uan Rasey who recommended me for the project. Billy May was hired to adapt the concerto to make it physically playable. After just two weeks from receiving the music and cramming in practise at 6am every morning, Conkling and I went into the studio to make a demo with two pianos. I didn't feel ready to record it, but Conkling insisted it was only a demo. Many copies of it made it into circulation. I have been to places far and wide around the world and these dubs, of a recording that I always felt had flaws, has been there to haunt me. After 28 years of revision and refinement, this was my chance to record it again.

**T.W.** What kind of preparation goes into recording a disc like this with such technically demanding repertoire as content?

**M.M.** I started on a path and a way of playing back in 1960 with James Stamp and have stayed on that path in a continual process of optimizing sound and improving efficiency. 48 years out of my 56 years of playing trumpet have been spent following this routine. Gee, that's a lot of preparation.

**T.W.** The CD is quite eclectic including music by Frank Zappa and Bruce Broughton alongside Bach and Tchaikovsky. You knew Zappa - was it a conscious decision to place his work



**Malcolm relaxing with Arturo Sandoval and Chuck Findlay**

*alongside Bach and Tchaikovsky, or was it more just a collection of music that you love?*

**M.M.** The choices were simply based on time invested. I spent 36 years practicing BeBop Tango since the night Frank called me up to his house and put the music in front of me. Tchaikovsky - it's been 30 years of practice. Bach - I played the Double Violin Concerto with Jimmy in our lessons 48 years ago. With that much time invested in this music, why not record it? Now, space for one more piece on the CD. The composer I chose - Bruce Broughton was the first name I had in mind when I thought about a living composer who

happens to be in the same genius category as these already in the great majority. A composer who can invent a piece and a concept in a traditional style in a very short time. Even with Bruce's knowledge of the British Brass Band tradition and the golden age of the cornet soloists, he still amazed me with a perfect tone poem based on a traditional theme with variations form of the 19th century - "Saloon Music for Bb Cornet and Pit Orchestra".

**T.W.** *You are an executive producer on your disc and you and your team [including acclaimed fellow Hollywood trumpeter and MD Gary Grant] recorded in your own studio in Hollywood. It must have been a joy to take time in a comfortable environment in order to make a document of your playing that you are happy with. Did you find it musically rewarding?*

**M.M.** I really didn't count on this ever happening. I can't tell you how good it feels to have something to share with my family and friends where they don't have to ask: "Are you the one who plays when the baby dies?" Having my own studio is a dream. I have a lot to do there. I'm just getting started. Gary Grant is the one who really made all of this possible. You're all probably aware that Gary, a phenomenal trumpet player who has played on thousands of hit records and as a member

of the Jerry Hey horns, has made his mark on the record business and is also an incredible producer in his own right. With artists like Wayne Bergeron, Maynard Ferguson and Arturo Sandoval, Gary certainly has made it to the A list of trumpet record producers.

**T.W.** *With your playing found on so many people's IPOD play lists, who is on yours?*

**M.M.** I think you would find Louis Armstrong, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Wayne Bergeron.

**T.W.** *What do you like to do outside of music to relax? Do you have any hobbies?*

**M.M.** History, family history, Hollywood history, music history, reading, watching TV.

**T.W.** *What does the future hold? Do you think you would like to work on more of your own projects like "Exquisite"?*

**M.M.** I'm working on another solo CD as we speak. It will be with trumpet and piano. The music consists of my adaptations of violin pieces with piano. Musically, it's very rewarding. Pianist Ayke Agus was accompanist and personal assistant to virtuoso violinist Jascha Heifetz for more than 15 years. It will be released hopefully sometime in 2009. I also have other projects planned, some with orchestra.

**T.W.** *Thanks again for talking to me Malcolm. I hope to see and hear you again soon.*

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