

Master Apprentices

Three top trombonists are apprentices to their tradition and to admired players. It has been a journey part conscious and part osmotic.

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Apprenticeship is an ancient tradition in music. In traditional Indian and African tribal societies, the aboriginal canon of music was and is taught by mentors to students aurally through long and intensive apprenticeships, often only available to those born into the relevant social caste. In those traditions, individualism and innovation are not the goals.

Jazz music has individualism, through improvisation, at its core. Jazz has its own tradition of apprenticeship. In the literal sense this is most famously embodied in Art Blakey's enduring Jazz Messengers ensembles through which Blakey schooled scores of now-famous jazz performers.

In a more abstract sense, it is the norm for students of jazz to focus on absorbing aurally the interpretation and improvisation styles of master musicians. In terms of desirability, to perform alongside a master is number one, followed by witnessing a performance, but more than likely the bulk of the work is done utilising recordings.

The trombone as an instrument has its own history of apprenticeship, such as in the baroque and renaissance periods, where its expressive qualities were valued so highly that trombone players were often the best-paid musicians in the court orchestra. Trombones, or their ancestors, featured heavily in sacred music, and musicians who were not born into the trade often married into it.

Belying its church origins, the trombone often takes on an animated character in jazz music, where the trombone is an expressive and particularly idiosyncratic instrument.

Three Contemporary Trombonists

"But if you talk about different approaches to playing trombone playing from the early period up until now, there's so many schools of playing because the trombone is the instrument that is – we say it, but it is – the instrument that's closest to the human voice... Our voices are so varied and different and the trombone is the instrument that's most capable of reproducing that." -

Wycliffe Gordon

"He makes the trombone talk, growl, mutter, moan, cry, sigh, squeal, exclaim, proclaim, and defame." - Wynton Marsalis

Wycliffe Gordon is well respected as a modern master of jazz trombone. He grew up in the state of Georgia in the USA. The son of a classical pianist and teacher, Gordon was introduced to jazz through his family. A high profile giant of American jazz, Wynton Marsalis, handpicked Gordon to join his band after hearing him at a college workshop. In the years since Gordon has distinguished himself as a prolific and recognisable soloist and educator. Eminent jazz critic Nat Hentoff has said,

“Of all the trombonists of his generation, Mr. Gordon is abidingly immersed in the entire jazz tradition. His own playing is immediately – often exuberantly – identifiable, but on trombone, he is an authority on the styles of Jack Teagaden, Trummy Young, Al Grey, Vic Dickenson, Dicky Wells and Lawrence Brown, a longtime soloist with Duke Ellington's orchestra.”

On the other side of the world, **James Greening** grew up in Newcastle and has been an important figure in Sydney jazz for at least 20 years. A product of Australia's diminishing brass band tradition, he became rapidly in demand for working bands and through fellow musicians was introduced to jazz recordings and Sydney's own jazz scene. Greening is an integral ingredient in celebrated ensembles Ten Part Invention, The Catholics, Wanderlust, and The Australian Art Orchestra, and also enjoyed a long and fruitful association with the late Jackie Orszaczky.

Dave Panichi was also introduced to music in brass bands in western Sydney. In the 1970's he fell easily into the busy commercial music profession and was introduced to jazz through peers and mentors. In 1981 he followed his passion to New York City where he was based for the next 19 years, distinguishing himself in bands led by Buddy Rich, Toshiko Akiyoshi and Bob Mintzer, before moving back to Australia in 2000, where he has formed his own septet.

Individually, each has developed his own distinct voice as an improvising trombonist: Gordon has evolved among his lauded peers while being immersed in America's jazz history and locales; Greening flourished amongst Sydney's own rich lineage; Panichi straddles two continents, and, at least in Sydney, more than one era.

These are musicians who are celebrated not just because they excellent instrumentalists, but because of the unique and individual character their improvisations bring to a performance.

Modern Apprenticeships

Differences in culture and origin aside, these performers present themselves as improvising musicians informed by the jazz tradition. Each is passionate about the potential for expression on the trombone and its ability to communicate in a universal manner through a distinct and specific – but somehow common – language.

When I spoke to our modern trombonists, they all described learning their unique and personal vocabulary from teachers and peers on the job, and through recorded media, the modern substitute for ancient mentors.

Wycliffe Gordon has a strong sense of how these processes fit into the jazz tradition of the last century;

“That was how they learned to play, from listening to each other. Sonny Rollins was down at the Vanguard checking out John Coltrane. The musicians heard other musicians play; they got ideas. It was a great way to learn and to develop: You know, ‘I heard John Coltrane doing this, or I heard Roy Eldridge doing this.’ Or, ‘I’ve heard Dizzy Gillespie do this and when Charlie Parker started playing I heard him do this,’ Or ‘I heard Cannonball...’ and lots of different influences based on their backgrounds.

“Particularly if you want to be a player and to be able to execute the music that they’ve done, if you want to be able to recreate it or add what you can get from that to your vocabulary it’s important to listen

intensely but also to try to reproduce as closely as you can the sounds that were made because that way now you have the vocabulary to go with it and it's not just notes."

In the current era, formalised jazz education is a huge industry in conservatoriums and contemporary music schools the world over. Often the principal objective in these institutions is to meet basic vocational standards, although materials and resources to help absorb the jazz vocabulary are widely available, as Dave Panichi explains,

"I think the best you can do in school is get to be basic professional level, and then anything else that happens after then you have to go in the real world and try and obtain it. I reckon it basically boils down to a couple of things: It's who you listen to the most, it's who you see live, most, and who you play with the most."

The implication is that there is some detail in the vocabulary that defines the music and yet is inexplicable. Aural teaching, whether in person or by (recorded) proxy avoids description and definition, but if done properly, misses neither detail nor definition, a kind of rote imitation that Gordon insists upon.

"I say, 'There's only one way to do it. You have to Do it.' It's not going to come [just] through the listening you have to put in the work. When I give a student an assignment to learn a JJ Johnson transcription, well they could buy the book and just read it from the book and play it from memory, but there's no way for that to be [accurately] notated, unless you know."

Jazz music is almost exactly the same age as the sound recording, and certainly as far back as the 1940s, commercial recordings have been a significant part of any jazz musician's education. But like the medieval trombonists (many of whom never saw sheet music), James Greening studied and absorbed the performance styles of his peers from the vantage point of co-performer, a very real and literal apprenticeship served across a variety of ensembles.

"I'd hear JJ [Johnson] [recordings] and I'd hear this articulation, this clarity, it's a trite word but it's neat, it's concise... and I went, 'Wow!' That was one of a number of elements. But it's an interesting thing; most of the stuff I've ever learnt has been like an apprentice: doing it. "I used to go and play in the Masonic orchestra, which was like 3 violins and a trumpet, then the drummer and I was kind of like the bass end but they often didn't have charts and stuff. So this is a point I remember, where I was having to play really clearly by ear, and memorising stuff and trying to pick it up as quickly as possible. "And I've got great learning out of listening endlessly to jazz musicians - so I owe an enormous debt to all the jazz musicians previously - [both] on gigs and through classic recordings and - through Miroslav [Bukovsky] and other friends - modern jazz recordings."
"My trombone study, my musician training, has been as an apprentice. I've been extremely fortunate, it's always been in practice, and most of the time what was asked of me was more than I had already done, or

wider than I had already done. It was a continual process of training, like an apprenticeship. And sometimes there were other trombone players there but most of the time there wasn't. My apprenticeship has been how to be a voice on the trombone.

"My mentors were... Jack [Orszaczky], which was his voice, and the piccolo [bass]- so they're not horn specific. So, all the people I've always listened to are: vocalists, Miles, Coltrane, guitarists - blues guitarists - it's not been horn specific. Most of my influences have been not trombone players."

Coming as he is from a geographical and cultural position so close to the origin of jazz, I thought it pertinent to ask Wycliffe Gordon whether he thought the process would be any different for students who are culturally a little further removed.

"It's no different than anywhere else, it's like the first time I went to Japan: I didn't know a lot of Japanese musicians that played jazz during that time, and there probably were, but the thing that I did see that I didn't even see in America was that they revered the music as something that was great, and important. I could find recordings in Japan that I couldn't even get in the United States, and I was like, 'Man, what is up with this? I'm going to have to come to Japan to find this music?' And I said, 'That is going to produce people that will learn to interpret this music and they will become great players of this music,' and it did happen: they have a lot of great Japanese artists..."

Masterless Apprentices

In spite of the common dedication to apprenticeship and imitation, and the honour these musicians bestow on their mentors and influences, the trombonists are unable or unwilling to identify any specific characteristic in their vocabulary as derivative.

Gordon admits there is nothing new under the sun, but prefers not to analyse which part of his musical personality comes from where.

"I have absolutely no idea. That's not a great concern of mine. I think there's very little that exists in the world, even in terms of music or otherwise, that didn't exist in some way, shape or form before.

"Myself personally, I haven't gone as far to say, 'I created that sound,' or, 'I created this.' I know if I hear young players that may have heard a recording of mine and they've taken something from that, but to say that I'm the first person to do that, that I don't know.

"It's like clay, like anything, you make it your own and I think that anyone has the opportunity to do that. But you will not get it if you're afraid to go inside [the vocabulary]; you have to go inside the room, you have to sit in the room, you have to understand what's happening in the room and you have to just do it until you can become a part of that and then you have the opportunity to get the information and to utilise it."

The combined media of apprenticeship – print music, performing, listening both live and on recording, imitating and repeating, may obscure the specific source. Dave

Panichi hints at the ability of the human brain to covertly recognise and deconstruct patterns and introduce them into unconscious use.

“I think a lot of it I got from playing charts, actually, and playing with people in sections and just noticing how they work the slide. Look, I used to see [trumpeter Freddie Hubbard] live, I’d go six nights in a row and for about two weeks or a month I’d play fifteen percent better but it would always be, sort of, my version of him.

“It’s interesting: I don’t think it’s necessarily conscious. You know what’s funny? It’s like how Jazz musicians pick up the lingo: you hang out with enough guys all of a sudden you say, ‘Cats.’ I don’t think it’s a terribly conscious process, I think that there is a fair amount of... anybody who is hanging out tends to speak the same language after a while, there is a bit of a commonality there.”

You are what you eat, and influences reveal themselves in many forms. I asked James Greening whether he might be inadvertently be referencing his sources during performance.

“I do it, and then I go, ‘Aaah.’ Then I look back at it, or as I’m doing it I recognise it. It’s just my vocabulary. But if people ask me...

“It’s inevitable that I’m doing that, I’m a human being, so that is inevitable; I’m doing it, whether I can tell you specific instance.... But it’s inevitable as a human being, because that’s how we do anything, unless we create it in a synthetic environment, which forces us to be specific, in a way. But generally speaking that’s how everyone learns everything; that’s how children learn how to talk.”

“If I was playing East St Louis Toodle-do, then I would play plunger, and I would try to pay as much respect as I can to the history and the origin, so now I’m thinking about plunger work historically, so that’s that.

“When I’m me, just playing in the Catholics or any other groups, of course that history comes with me, who would want to delete it? But slowly I’ve developed more confidence and clarity on what me is with the plunger. It’s like, when I play plunger on the trombone it’s not a trombone but a plunger with me at the end of it, it’s me. It’s got to that point where I feel just like that.”

Each of these musicians has clearly identified an apprenticeship, real and constructed, in their practice and development as musicians. They are sure of the importance of this process but they are, however, reticent to quantify the precise influence on their present identity. Without delving into cognitive science, it’s fair to assume, as James Greening suggests, the same powerful device in our brain that deciphers spoken language can build a distinct and expressive personal musical vocabulary by extrapolating examples presented to it. In this way our trombonists can develop their individual personalities while sharing a fairly common language, in an intuitive manner, and thereby avoiding any conscious reference.