Introduction to Volume One

One of the things that all jazz musicians do sooner or later is think about putting their thoughts down in a book. A musician spends countless hours learning to play jazz on, say, the bagpipe and (s)he naturally assumes that the body of pedagogical information thus acquired should be written up and put at the disposal of other aspiring jazz bagpipers (bagpipists?). Relatively few have the chutzpah to go all the way and actually publish their musings, but enough have done so that it is now possible to construct a two-lane highway from New York to Toronto and pave it completely with jazz textbooks.

So why anther? Why, indeed.

My goals are mostly altruistic in that I remember how abysmally long it took me to learn to play jazz on the trumpet, and I would hate to see anybody else have to spend the same amount of time. Writing down a few helpful hints and exercises might actually save the reader some time in his/her development. We're living in the age of trumpet mastery, don't forget. It you want to be taken seriously as an artist these days, you had better exhibit extreme virtuosity of tongue and fingers. And don't forget range; range is a must.

High notes, spine-tinglingly exciting on any instrument, are especially so when played on the trumpet. Audiences expect them, and as the pressure has grown to comply with the demands of an ever higher, faster, louder music, so has psychological trauma spread among trumpet players everywhere. Actually, I'm overstating the situation; it's not as bad as all that. But my personal difficulties in acquiring range, endurance, and consistency have bought several BMW's for my analyst and have led to my somewhat jaundiced view of the situation.

The fact remains, however, that trumpet players are often judged by the extent of their range. You rarely hear people who have attended a concert by a tenor saxophonist remarking how high the soloist played. When discussing a trumpet performance, however, people tend to say things like, "Man, that [insert name] really has some chops!" A notable exception, of course, was the late Chet Baker, who never had much range or power to begin with and had even less after losing some front teeth to an uncaring fist. Chet got by on musicality alone, hugged the mike, and sang whenever his chops gave out. No one seemed to mind. Chet, however, was decidedly the exception. I've always felt that trumpet playing, especially jazz trumpet playing, should not be perceived as an athletic event. Alas, it has often been so and will, I fear, so remain.

But so what? I say, if trumpet gymnastics is what is called for, let's hit the practice room. Sooner or later, if one is a serious artist, the idea will arise that perhaps self-expression -- not skill alone should be the real aim of a jazz musician. The possibility of expressing pain, frustration, and general angst through the jazz medium will eventually attract anyone who seeks his/her own voice.

Mind you, I'm all for clean technique. The better your craft, the more completely you can express yourself. Jazz is, however an expression of life, and life can be untidy. If a player is operating at the far frontiers of his or her ability, pushing the envelope so to speak, it seems to me that a certain amount of failure is inevitable. Maybe even desirable. A performance that is too clean and immaculate of execution doesn't necessarily speak to me on a human level. But maybe that's just me.

Volumes I and II of The Art of Jazz Trumpet do not have any method for achieving a phenomenal high register. The topics I have dealt with are phrasing, articulation and valve technique. Volume I contains an historical overview of contemporary jazz trumpet playing. I have included a few facts that I feel are important and a few opinions which may not be. Volume II consists of exercises derived from Volume I, and is intended to fit easily inside of a gig bag.

If the reader knows nothing about chords or scales, (s)he may not grasp everything in this book, but I think everyone can get some benefit.

John McNeil
Brooklyn, New York
Spring, 1993