



## AN INTERVIEW WITH SLIDE HAMPTON

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Ask any jazz trombonist to name his or her three favorite players on their instrument, and chances are one of them will be Locksley Wellington "Slide" Hampton.

Born in 1932, Hampton got his earliest musical experience with his family's band in his hometown of Indianapolis. On his own in the 1950s, he progressed through some of the top bands in the business and also began to receive acclaim as an arranger.

In the early 1960s Hampton led a larger-than-life sounding octet. He later worked as a musical director for Motown. By 1968, as the American jazz scene began to dry up, Hampton headed to Europe for an extended and fruitful stay. He returned to the US in the mid-1970s and organized the now legendary World of Trombones, a unique nine-bones-plus-rhythm combo that showcased an array of then up-and-coming trombone talent.

As highly regarded for his writing as he is for his playing, Hampton serves as musical director for the JazzMasters, an all-star big band offshoot of Dizzy Gillespie's United Nation Orchestra, is also a renowned clinician, and most of all, serves as a role model, patron, and godfather to a new generation of trombonists.

**Many jazz musicians come from musical families, but yours was extraordinarily musical, wasn't it?**

Yeah, my father was a musician, and my mother. When I was young there was already a band in existence in the family. There were no trombones and they wanted a trombone player in the family band, so they chose it for me.

We played music from the repertoire of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Kenton. We played dances and we played political affairs. Anything that the people would pay us to play, we would play. We played on carnivals, a variety of things we did. That's actually how we made our living, as musicians.

There used to be many family bands, the [Lester] Young family, the [Oscar] Pettiford family. Tradition was a very important thing at that time and the music was



**Slide Hampton**

North Sea Jazz Festival, The Hague, Holland  
Photo By: Carol Steuer

greatly affected by it--so was the public in general.

**And there were the Montgomery brothers, who also are from Indianapolis.**

Yes, yes. Buddy Montgomery is around my age, and I was very close with Buddy, and so was one of my brothers, who is two years older than myself. We were very much in love with music, all three of us. Buddy was part of his family band--Monk and Wes and Buddy, and their sister was a musician, too. But they were working on developing their own quartet, which was Wes Montgomery on guitar, Monk on bass, and Buddy on piano, and they had a friend, Sonny Johnston, who played drums. We used to go to their house and listen to them rehearse all the time.

**While we're on the subject on Indianapolis musicians, could you tell me when you met J.J. Johnson?**

J.J.'s older than me, and J.J. had already started to pursue a professional career before we were old enough to kind of hang out with him. But from time to time he would come back to Indianapolis. He came back with the Illinois Jacquet band, and when he would come to visit sometimes he would participate in jam sessions. That's where I first met J.J., at a jam session at a place called the Red Keg.

He had come down to the place because his friends played there. They wanted him to play, but he didn't have his trombone. This place had a big glass front--you could see in, but at my age, I couldn't go in. But I had my horn, so I gave him my horn and he went in and played, and he played so beautifully!

**How big was your family's band?**

Well, it varied from time to time. Sometimes it was just the family. It would be four sisters, five brothers and my father and mother. And then sometimes we would add some people that were not relatives of ours and make it a little closer to the regular dance band size. When we played in New York, it must have been about fourteen pieces.

First we came and played Carnegie Hall and then we went back to Indianapolis. Then we came back and played the Apollo Theater, the Savoy Ballroom, and after two weeks in the Savoy we went back into the Apollo Theater by popular demand. I tried to convince my family, "Let's stay in New York. This is the place that we can really develop a career as musicians." But they wanted to go back to Indianapolis.

I wanted to get back to New York as quick as I could 'cause I'd seen and heard Bud Powell and people like that. After that, all of my aspirations were keyed to New York. So as soon as I was old enough and I could go out on my own, I left the family band and I was on my way to New York. It took me a long time to get there.

**What were some of the first important gigs that you had on your own?**

I was living in Houston, Texas, and Buddy Johnson's band came through. He heard me playing with a band down there and Buddy took me to New York, and that was the first well-known band I played with. That was around '53.

**Were you arranging at that time?**

Well, I was trying. I wrote a couple of things for Buddy's band. There weren't really suited for the band, but he was a very nice guy and he gave me the opportunity to have the band play them, and we recorded one of them. He was a very talented composer himself, a good piano player and twice that good as a human being. He helped me a lot and gave me the opportunity to write a few things. I was trying to learn how to write at that time.

**Buddy Johnson had a very good band, although it wasn't as well-known as some of the other bands of that time.**

Yeah, because Buddy wasn't that concerned with really being popular. He did have popularity because he had records that did well, mostly with his sister, Ella Johnson. He loved the band, he loved the musicians, he loved to play for the people. A wonderful, happy kind of guy. Now if he had been a guy that wanted to, he probably could have achieved much more success, as far as popularity is concerned.

After Buddy Johnson I had the misfortune of going with Lionel Hampton. I was much better off with Buddy, because Buddy was the exact opposite to Lionel Hampton.

**Misfortune? In what way?**

Lionel Hampton is also a great musician, but really not a very caring person. He never really tried to give the musicians the kind of conditions that they could work in and would inspire them. And he never really inspired people to go to other heights. If you were with his band and he really liked you, he would almost threaten you if you wanted to leave and go with somebody else.

And that was very unfortunate because he was a guy that had possibilities, especially for a lot of the Afro-American musicians, to open up doors for them. But he was such an egomaniac he couldn't consider what was happening for anybody else.

He had a lot of good musicians in the band. Clifford Brown was there, Wes Montgomery was there, Art Farmer, Gigi Gryce, Benny Golson. And had some good bands. Sometimes the band was fantastic, but he still had to be the one that was noticed the most. He had to be out front, which was good. The guys were for that, too, but he never was able to say, "This band is really something that's important in my musical life." He could never do that.

**So it's not surprising that you left Hampton and joined Maynard Ferguson's band.**

Yeah, I went with Maynard, which was another pleasant experience. Maynard was a very nice guy, a very fine musician, and really gave all the musicians a chance to develop musical expertise there. He was the exact opposite from Hamp. He and Buddy Johnson were guys that were quite a bit alike. He was really very considerate of the musicians and very respectful of us.

**By the time you left Maynard's band and formed your own octet in the early 1960s you were fairly well established as an arranger. How were you able to**

**make that small band, with just six horns, sound so large?**

By that time, I had heard Art Blakey's band, with only three horns. It sounded like a real big band, you see, and that's because their concept of writing wasn't based on the kind of theory that you usually get in classical writing. Usually you write instruments together that are pretty much in the same register family.

But in Art Blakey's band, they wrote things in a more open harmony, so it sounded bigger. The trumpet may be an octave above the tenor, and the trombone might be an interval of a sixth away from the tenor, so you've got these wide intervals. When you have that kind of open harmony, you get overtones and that makes it sound full. It sounds big.

And I remember some of the things that used to be written in some of the big bands, where they maybe had a saxophone section laying down some kind of long tones, and they had a trumpet playing some melody way away from that. It would sound full and big and it was not even half of the ensemble.

So if you take six horns and use that same kind of concept, you get a real big sound. Like if you have four instruments that are playing the lower voices of the harmony, and they have some kind of a harmonic structure that constitutes a chord, and you put the trumpets on some other notes that are far away from that, it sounds like the whole thing, somehow, is connected. But there's a lot of wide intervals between the instruments. That's usually when you get a big sound. That's how you arrive at it.

**But in order to produce those overtones, the horns all have to be in tune.**

Intonation is very important, because it sets up the harmonics. When the intonation is not good, then it kind of cancels the harmonics.

**The octet was your first experience as a leader. What were some of the lessons that you learned?**

One thing I think I got out of it is that I was definitely not a bandleader. The things that I was thinking about at that time were not the things that I should have been thinking about to really make the band the best that it could have been. The musicians were there, and I had some ideas about some things that I should do for the band, but I was over-anxious.

I was thinking about the commercial aspect of it more than about just developing the music. Develop the music, have faith in the music. That's where the real success of the band would have been.

**So you thought the band was too commercial?**

I thought the band was affected by the fact that I felt it had to be commercial. I spent time thinking about that when I should have just made the band the best it could be. With all of those great musicians and the ideas that would come out of that, you would get something that will appeal to the some audience somewhere. It's almost impossible for it not to happen. So we were trying to make commercial music, and the thing that we didn't realize was that any music that's really good and interesting is

commercial.

### **Why did you decide to move to Europe?**

The '60s was when pop music started to dominate the scene. I worked in Motown before I went to Europe. I was a musical director for Stevie Wonder and the Four Tops, and I directed some of the big shows and wrote some arrangements. Motown started out as a very small--actually, one-man--business, and it grew and grew and grew because that music was becoming so dominating in the country at that time. And then the Beatles came.

And then instrumental music became something that you didn't hear that much of anymore. The music became more and more commercial. Even guys like Wes Montgomery, they still had to record commercial music. But I was still very much taken by Miles and Coltrane and J.J. and all those guys. That's where my heart was and I wanted to learn more about that music.

So I went to Europe and found out that there were a lot of opportunities for people that were into that concept of music. I went over with Woody Herman in '68, and we played two weeks in England. Then I went to France, and I lived in France for six years after that. I did television, recording, radio, which they don't have over here--you know, they have radio orchestras and radio programs that are subsidized by the government for a certain amount of jazz--concerts, cultural houses, everything you could think of. It had never been like that over here.

The opportunities that were available to us were just so outstanding and I stayed over there for eight years. I worked with Don Byas, I worked with Dexter Gordon, I worked with Don and Dexter together, I worked with Art Farmer and Dexter together, and Johnny Griffin.

### **But unlike most of those guys, you eventually returned to the States.**

Things were starting to change over here. The National Endowment for the Arts started to subsidize more jazz projects. And the clubs were starting to open again. Pop music was starting to, not die, but starting to take more of a normal place in the music field. It wasn't dominating it so strongly as it had before.

### **Let's talk about the trombone for a while. You play left-handed. How did that come about?**

See, our training was coming from our father, and he hadn't had any formal training, and my mother also, who had probably studied some on piano. My father was a natural player. He played saxophone and drums. As the kids were born he would give them an instrument and teach them as much about it as he knew, and then you'd go out on your own and learn everything else. And so we were mostly all self-taught.

They gave me the trombone left-handed and I played it that way. It's the only thing I do with my left hand. I did study with a few different teachers, but they never tried to influence me to play right-handed. In fact, in Indianapolis there was a music school called the MacArthur Conservatory. I went to that school and I think three of my other brothers went there. I had a good teacher and he never bothered about the fact

that I was playing left-handed. He mainly tried to help me with my embouchure and things like that.

**I once heard you say that in order to play the trombone you really have to love it. All musicians love their instruments, but is there something special about the trombone?**

The trombone is the kind of instrument that you can be a natural musician, but you still have to dedicate yourself to it in order to have any level of proficiency. Otherwise the trombone will give you the impression that it's a very difficult instrument to play, but it's not really the trombone that's difficult. It's your understanding of the instrument that counts, your willingness to dedicate yourself to developing a rapport with the instrument and understanding the nature of the instrument.

When you're playing the trombone well, you've worked on it. You've developed a respect for that instrument. And it makes you develop a respect for music in general, because you don't get music out of a trombone just by blowing air into it.

The most that you can do on trombone, actually, is make music. You can't really excite people, most times, on a technical level. You have to excite them with the music that you make. Some guys have a lot of technique, but technique in the case of the trombone doesn't always come out very musical.

The thing that has to be put first is the musical achievement. And although you don't have all the advantages of the other instruments, you can still compete with those guys if you understand what it is about the instrument that's valuable.

**Was that why you formed your World of Trombones band back in the late 1970s?**

Well, there was a reason for it. I came back from Europe and they were starting to use a few more instruments on recordings again, but not many. They were using trumpets, saxophones, guitars, and synthesizers and things like that, but they weren't using any trombones. And they hadn't used any for a long time.

A lot of people probably didn't even know what a trombone was at that time, except in classical music. Often when I would go into the airport with a trombone, people never could figure out what instrument it was. They even asked if it was a guitar--in a case like that!

So I said, "We have to put some groups together to give people a chance to get used to the sound of the trombone again." In Europe, I had a group with four trombones. Then we had a group over here with four trombones and every so often we'd add another. The more we added, the better it sounded, 'til we finally got to where we were doing nine trombones with the World of Trombones.

Max Gordon gave us a job at the Village Vanguard for a week, and he even said, "I don't want all those trombones in here." But he wanted me to come in, so I said, "Well, if you want me, take the trombones."

Bill Cosby came down and asked us to play some concerts with him. A guy came down that was starting a new record company and he heard the group and he really liked it. So he asked us to record that album, *World of Trombones*. And that was really our objective with that group, to bring the sound of the trombone to the general public.

**You wrote some tough charts for that band.**

They were hard and, I'll tell you one thing, we were lucky we had Janice Robinson playing lead. She played all the hard lead, and that left me free to write a lot of stuff.

We still were limited because most of us were fairly inexperienced. I mean, I was the most experienced one in the group and some of the other people were quite new as trombone players. I thought we would use this music also as a form of practice and exercise, so I'd write things that we don't usually play as trombones and we could work on them and that would help us all individually.

And the guys were very enthusiastic about it. We used to rehearse all the time. And we played quite a few gigs, too, concerts and clubs. We only did the one recording, but we did things for the radio, and I'm looking forward to the chance when we can get to do something else now, with all the advances that the guys have made.

I don't want to record two, three, four albums a year, 'cause that means the energy is depleted long before you get to the second album. But I'd like to do another thing with the trombones, because all the guys that were playing in that group have made so much progress. Now together as a trombone ensemble, they should really make a wonderful sound. So it may be something in the near future that I might get to do again.

**Another thing I've heard you say was that you prefer practicing to performing. I wonder why.**

When you're playing in an ensemble, you have a lot of things that effect what you're doing. And you also have a lot of things that cover up what you're doing, good and not good.

But not when you're practicing. You hear everything when you're practicing. If it sounds good, you hear that. If it doesn't sound good, you hear that. In most musical ensembles, the personalities of the people greatly effect the final result. And that's the reason for playing by yourself. You don't have other personalities to deal with. You don't have somebody coming in that has had a big meal just before they came to the concert, or a guy that's been drinking.

When you get into a situation where everything is compatible, then playing with other people is wonderful. But I think it's very important that when people are playing at the same time, they have to realize that playing together is what they're there for, not just playing "at the same time."

**Then you don't dislike performing.**

When I find the right situation. I mean, when I play with Jimmy Heath, I love it. We

just played at Fat Tuesday's and the ensemble was beautiful. The guys were coming every night to play. They were very compatible and they were really working to make the most out of the music. So that kind of situation, when you're in that, it's great.

But then you get in another situation where you've got great musicians, but they don't necessarily play together. It's hard for me to make any music in that kind of situation. You have to really be able to respect the difference in another musician's playing. When I play with a guy like Al Grey, who plays different than me, I find that's a great experience, because I always learn a lot from Al. So I try to adjust to each situation and make my music somehow compatible with what they do.

**So how many hours a day do you practice?**

Well, you know what I would like to do? I'd like to practice all day. The only reason I can't is because sometimes I practice so much that it becomes non-productive, as far as the rapport between metal and flesh. I practice four or five hours a day, now. Sometimes I practice more. I'll play until early morning, until three o'clock, sometimes.

**But then you've got to use a mute.**

Sometimes, but sometimes I just play soft. I've never had a complaint in this building. These walls are supposed to be made especially thick. And the people that live next door [he points toward one of the walls], this is their living room here, so their bedroom is over there. They probably don't hear anything.

They give me kind of funny looks, sometimes, when I see them during the days, 'cause I have the whole trombone section from the [JazzMasters] band up here practicing, so they must hear it. But I usually try to have my rehearsals during the day when most of them are at work, so I never get a complaint about it.

Robin Eubanks and I practice and play together a lot. Sometimes I'll play for him at the piano and he'll improvise. Then he'll play for me and I'll improvise, and we'll just go on like that for hours. That's the way that we used to do it when we learning. We used to get together and play and jam for hours, in any setting. If you had a rhythm section or if you didn't have one, we were always jamming. So that's what Robin and I are starting to do, which is very healthy for both of us.

**Robin told me you literally brought him up here from Philadelphia.**

It's true. When we had the World of Trombones, I encouraged him to come up and I told him, "You know, New York is the place. If you really want to be a musician, this is the place." We had some jobs and I encouraged him to come up and rehearse and play those jobs with us, and he stayed at my house.

See, I had a big house in Brooklyn. Eric Dolphy lived there for a long time. Freddie Hubbard lived there, and Wes Montgomery. Trane used to come there all the time. And Wayne Shorter used to live there. We had 13, 14 rooms in the house, right in Fort Greene [Brooklyn], right around the corner from Spike Lee's father, [bassist] Bill Lee. A lot of musicians lived in that area. There were jam sessions and people



practicing and rehearsing for years. 245 Carlton Avenue--Eric Dolphy recorded a song on one of his albums called "245." So then Robin used to live there, and his brother, Kevin. They both lived there.

**Shifting gears one more time, you've said that criticism from other musicians is a very important part of the learning process in jazz. In what way?**

In the late '40s and the early '50s, all of the musicians were very supportive of each other, but they were also very critical. A couple of things really stand out in my mind, and every day of my life, somehow, these experiences I think of.

Like when I was very young in Indianapolis and first trying to learn how to play. We were in love with music and we didn't realize the seriousness of it. We thought love alone was gonna make us into musicians, but it doesn't. Love gets you started into the learning process and that's all. Then you've gotta work real hard and try to make whatever progress you can.

I remember one of my friends told me when I went to my first jam session, he said, "I want to tell you something. You don't come back here until you've worked on what you're doing." He said, "You're playing the wrong changes. Your intonation is bad. Your sound, everything is bad." Man, it was such a shock, but I went home and I started to really work on that stuff.

There was one thing that I heard about Charlie Parker. When he first came out he was very inexperienced and he played really very badly. Somebody told him, or in some way made it known to him, and he went back and practiced eighteen hours a day for one year. Then he came out playing the way he played.

You know, the thing about Bird that most people don't realize--I mean, unless you're a musician, and sometimes the musicians don't realize it--he played the most perfect theory as a soloist that anybody ever played. The only time he played something outside of the chord was when he wanted to. Otherwise, his lines were perfect theoretically.

And I know that he didn't do that much studying. Most of his theoretical "training" was with Dizzy. Dizzy showed him a lot of things about what he was already doing. Dizzy said, "This is what you're doing," but he was already doing it right.

**So Bird probably was a true genius.**

He was a genius. There can be only a few geniuses, and thank goodness, 'cause they're usually a different kind of people.

But that was very important about what was happening in the '40s and '50s, the healthy aspect of it, the "keep-growing" aspect. And that's one thing that people need to learn in this society, that no matter how good you think you are, you've got a hell of a lot to learn. That goes for anybody. The minute that you feel like, "Well, I'm big enough now that I can make all the decisions," that's when things are going to start going in the wrong direction. Because nobody is that big.

And that's what that music did. That music made you feel as though, "I gotta keep

getting better, 'cause there's somebody else that's getting better." And that was healthy for us, yeah. Today we have missed a lot of that.

When you don't have that kind of environment you have to do a lot of work on your own, a lot of work. You can never make up for the experience of being around great musicians, no matter how much you practice, because it's so inspiring to be around people that are doing what you do better than you do it. And that was always the case. No matter how good you played, there was always somebody that played better than you played. There was never a "best," you know?

**And all the great musicians have understood that. Duke, Dizzy, and Art Blakey never stopped learning and growing.**

**Ego was never a thing for them. They always felt more humble. Dizzy was a very humble guy. And Trane, Trane was very humble. Very beautiful and very humane and, "What can I do to help somebody?" This is the healthiest attitude that a person can have.**

Society has to grow on that kind of energy. Then we won't have all the stuff that's starting to become so common, with everybody being against everybody else. Now you have to be "inferior" if you're different. That's a fool's idea! You know, you can never tell what a person has to offer you unless you're able to be open to that person and go to them and see what kind of communication you can have.

**Then for you, music is a powerful force.**

It's very important for people to know what the real purpose of music is. They think that music often is just for their entertainment. And it's certainly entertaining, but it's for a much more serious reason than that. Without music and without art we'd really be in trouble on this planet. We're in enough trouble as it is, but it's nothing like it would be, though! Music is very, very therapeutic, very healthy for people.

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Last year brought the release of a long awaited--and overdue--new recording by Slide Hampton, *Inclusion* (Twin Records). His original *World of Trombones* album is available on CD, but even better, Hampton has plans to bring back an expanded version of the *World of Trombones* later this year.

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Bob Bernotas is a freelance jazz journalist and jazz historian living in New York City. His work has appeared in many music publications, he has written numerous CD liner notes, and he is the author of nine books, notably Branford Marsalis: Jazz Musician, a biography for young readers. He also is a student of master jazz trombonist Benny Powell.

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