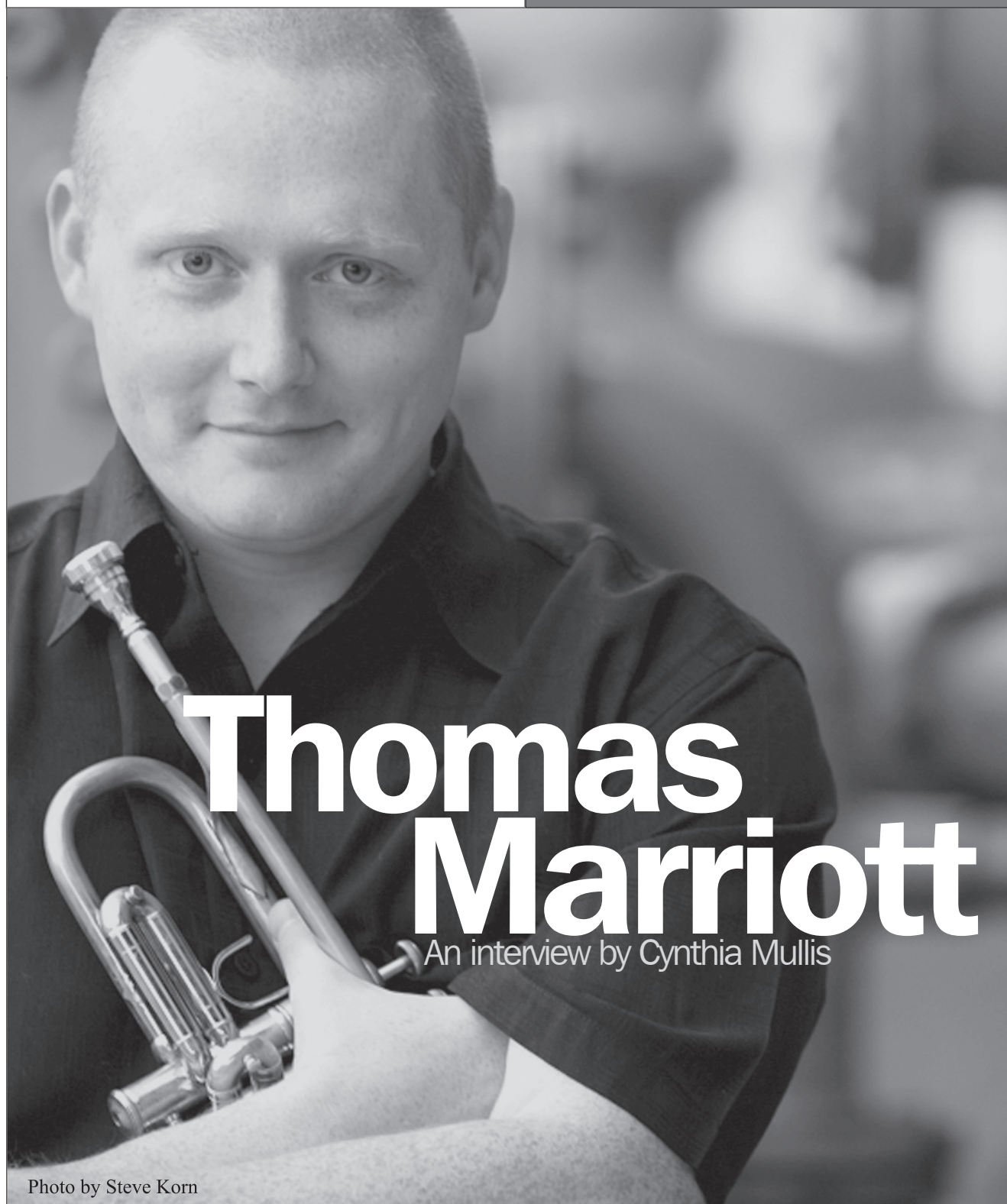




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Thomas Marriott

An interview by Cynthia Mullis

Photo by Steve Korn

NEW NORTHWEST RELEASES:

Scenes Along the Way Phil Kelly Big Band My Museum Bill Anschell More to the Ear Than Meets the Eye Thomas Marriott Both Sides of the Fence Vern Sielert Dektet From There to Here Dean Schmidt I Know Nothing

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tom marriott makin' music with his friends

Interview by Cynthia Mullis

Seattle native Thomas Marriott is a world class musician and superb trumpet player. Performances with luminaries such as Rosemary Clooney, The Chico O'Farrell Orchestra, Richie Cole, Joe Locke and Kenny Kirkland, plus solo efforts on his recent albums have gained him numerous awards and recognition throughout the music world. Now making Seattle his home once again, Thomas is a member of many ensembles including the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra, Carlos Cascante y su Tumbao, Marc Seales New Quintet, Randy Halberstadt Quintet, and frequent work with Greta Matassa. Since returning to Seattle, he released his first solo album *Individuation* on the Origin Records label in 2005 and has two more CDs coming out this year.

In 1999 he won the prestigious Carmine Caruso International Jazz Trumpet Competition sponsored by the International Trumpet Guild and the Herb Albert Foundation. In 2000, Thomas joined the Maynard Ferguson Big Band, and relocated to New York City. After completing three world tours with Ferguson, Thomas worked in and around New York with musicians as diverse as Bob Berg, The Tito Puente Orchestra, Eric Reed, Brian Lynch, Bebo Valdez, Eddie Palmieri and many others. Thomas Marriott is a C.G.Conn sponsored artist and clinician. His website is www.thomasmariott.net

Here he talks with saxophonist Cynthia Mullis about his new projects and his odyssey to New York City and back.

CM: Tell me about the projects you have going.

TM: On February 20th I've got an album coming out called "Both Sides of the Fence" and it's with Marc Seales, Jeff Johnson and John Bishop. We like to joke around and call it the A-team. Joe Locke plays on a couple of tunes and Hadley plays on a tune or two. It's a pretty straightforward jazz record. There are some standards on it, there are some jazz tunes on it, some reharmonized things, and

then some original tunes. So that's done, in the can, ready to go. That's the main one. And the Willie Nelson Project thing has been recorded and that will be out sometime in the summertime. You came down to the Triple Door last time?

CM: Yeah, right before you recorded it, and I heard you at the Jazz Walk too.

TM: Yeah, the Jazz Walk. That was fun.

CM: So the one coming out in February, you're the leader?

TM: Yeah, it's my album

CM: And is the Willie Nelson thing a collaborative thing?

TM: It's my project. It's all my arrangements and stuff, all of my money (laughter). The album will be called "Thomas Marriott, Crazy, the Music of Willie Nelson." It's my project, my dumb idea and I take full responsibility.

CM: I don't know about that, I thought it was pretty clever. Where did you get the idea?

TM: I was at home, sitting right here and I was listening to this interview with Waylon Jennings on Fresh Air. They played a little clip from this movie called "The Songwriter" that was out in the '70s. It was "Write Your Own Song" from that movie and it's this real Okie waltz kind of tune. It was on the radio in the bedroom and out here I was listening to Weather Report's "Black Market." So "Black Market" was going on in here and they were playing this Willie Nelson thing in there. I was halfway out the door and I thought "wow, you could put these together and it would be kind of cool." I always like Willie Nelson's music. I thought what if you did a whole album of Willie Nelson music? So I just jotted it down on a post-it note and put it on my mirror and thought about it for a couple of months. I wrote Willie Nelson Project and it was like, "is this a good idea, is this a bad idea?" I bought a couple of compilations and a box set and started listening. So over

the Fourth of July weekend, I sort of holed up and just started going through tunes and writing, sketching out some things. Took me about a month to write it all and get it to where I wanted it. Then we got together and rehearsed it and played a show and realized I didn't have enough music for a whole gig so I went back and figured out some more things. After having thought about it, some of those are actually the better tunes. We left a couple of the earlier ones off the album. But that's how it happened. I just thought it would be funny. It still cracks me up, on cer-

tain tunes, like when we play "Crazy" or "On the Road Again."

But other than that, the other things that I'm dealing with are, trying to do a jazz night at the Sunset Tavern. Matt Jorgensen and I had talked about that we should start playing jazz in places that are not jazz venues. So February, March and April we are doing the second Monday of the month at the Sunset.

I'm also working on this thing called "Practice This" that will start in January. It's a series of articles that will run in Earshot Magazine that are lessons with musicians in the Seattle area. Rick Mandyck did one, Chris Spencer did one, Jay Thomas has done one, about a specific topic that's more conceptual in nature than chords or theoretical kinds of things. And then you go to the Earshot website and there's a sound clip program of Jay Thomas talking about the be-bop scale or whatever topic. Been trying to find funding for that and get all the musicians interviewed, but three of them are done. What else am I doing right now? That's it. Just getting ready, book the tour for the next record.

CM: Tell me more about your connection with Joe Locke.

TM: Joe was my neighbor in Queens. He had just split up from his wife and moved and I saw him in the grocery store, looking at tomatoes. I said "are you Joe Locke the vibes player?" and he goes, "no man, I get recognized in the grocery store all the time!" We just sort of got to talking and it turned out we knew some of the same people—I mean obviously he knows everybody. So he said "what are you cooking?" and I said I'm cooking this and that and I said "why don't you come over to our house for dinner?" Then we had Thanksgiving at my house—we had about 4 or 5 people—him, Gary Versace, Jon Wikan and Ingrid Jensen, whoever was orphaned around. He hired me for a couple of month's worth of gigs for this regular Thursday gig at this place called Kave House in Soho with this band called Wirewalkers. It was like his fusion band. It was fun, really fun. Good music, it was cool. He hired me to play a couple of record dates, back-up horn parts for a couple records he produced. Bob Berg was on one of them, I got to play a couple of heads with Bob Berg.

CM: Was that before "Four Walls of Freedom"?

TM: Right before that. I would see him all over the place. We just became friends. We played together here and there, dinner at each other's house. When I was moving out here, I was like well we have to stay in touch and we have to keep playing together and I had planned on doing my first album, and it was like "Joe, what will you charge me for playing on it?" So he came out here and we did a thing at the Earshot festival, then he came out again to do the Ballard Jazz festival when they recorded that album. Then he came out again to mix, which was when we recorded for the album that's coming out now. Then we're playing at the Denver Jazz Festival in February. We just try to keep booking stuff with each other so we can keep playing and working. He's just a great guy, just a great guy.

photo by Steve Korn





photo by Steve Korn

I wouldn't see him for a few months and we'd get together and within about 10 minutes we'd be talking about something really out. He's just a great musician who has played and worked with everybody and is super bad. He's the kind of guy you want to meet when you go to NY, you want to work with, get your dues paid. He's great. I've learned a lot of stuff from him. I'm going away for the month of January, going to Argentina, and when we come back, I'm doing this gig with him. I don't know what we're going to play, and it's kind of a big budget kind of gig with a good rhythm section from NY.

CM: The Denver gig?

TM: They offered us, or we asked for, I should say, a pretty hefty chunk of money so we were able to afford to bring a really really good rhythm section from NY that Joe works with. So I want to make sure I'm not the chump from Seattle.

CM: One of the things that I'm interested in is your perspective on Seattle now that you're back from New York. It seems like your path up until New York was pretty well charted, but then what happened? How was NYC and how is it to be back?

TM: NY's a funny thing, you know. You know, it used to be that you'd go there to pay some dues. That's not such a thing that happens anymore. I think most of the young musicians that go now go there to go to school. I didn't go to school there, I went to school here. I left Seattle in '99 because I was offered a job with Maynard Ferguson and I did that for awhile. Before I got offered the job, I had planned to move to NY in April of 2000 with Jon Wikan. Then this thing came up that I wasn't expecting, and they needed to know right then and there if I could join their next tour. The band had been through town during the WTO riots and I went down and played with the band then. I had known that the road manager had gotten one of my CDs and called me and talked to me. I was never a big fan of Maynard Ferguson so I really wasn't familiar with what the band was doing so I went down to see it. The band really didn't sound that good. So I really had to think "is this something I want to do?" and I asked some friends of mine. I had known a few musicians that lived in NY from when they would come through town. Tito Puente came through town several times and I got to be friends with Ray Vega. So I called him up and I said "what should I do?" and he said, "well you know there's really no substitute for working for a master." You should just do it and if you don't like it you can always quit. So I did it, I packed up everything in my apartment and went on the road.

When we had time off, we'd have three or four weeks so I would go to NY and stay with a friend and look for an apartment with Jon. I never came back here when I had time off. I had an opportunity to work this job out here for a man that was a process server in NYC. Once in a while he would send me some legal work, some legal papers to serve, someone to lean on or whatever, out here in Seattle. He knew that I was planning on moving to NY so one of

the times I had time off, I went and got my process server's license 'cause I knew I was going to need a job when I moved there to start paying dues all over again. When I was getting ready to quit Maynard's band, I called this guy up and I said "I'm going to be quitting, do I still have a job?" and he said "yeah." The money was really good working for him and it was flexible. I went out on the road with Rosemary Clooney for awhile and I lived in NY. It was really nice. I had this job that was really flexible. I had gigs that I could do. I got wrapped up

in the club date thing for about a year and a half and that was hard to get out of. Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday playing a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah on Long Island. The money was pretty decent but it takes you away from doing what you're trying to do.

I went there with a certain set of goals that I wanted to accomplish, I had ideas of what I thought I was going to do. And about 6 months after being there, all of that changed, because you sort of see what those things are for real. Things that I wanted to do, I didn't want to do anymore. And things that were really important stopped being important, but other things were more important. Playing really good was a lot more important than other things. Things change.

CM: So what were your goals when you first went out there?

TM: Oh, you know. I wanted to play with Elvin Jones. I wanted to be on the Tito Puente Orchestra. I wanted to sideman with as many people as I could...work all the time. I think that prior to my moving there, like in the earlier '90s, there was sort of a bigger scene of professional musicians in NY. You could go to Bradlees or Visiones and see Larry Willis or George Cables or Joe Lovano or whoever. And these guys were out playing all the time, playing regular kind of gigs. That stopped being the case. Those clubs all closed, the gigs stopped paying money, Sweet Basil closed, all these places closed. Those musicians made their living primarily on the road like they always did, but they weren't really part of the scene of musicians anymore. I think that the scene changed from being one where there was a mixture of young musicians on the scene and seasoned professionals to being one where it was all college kids, all young music students trying to get ahead. Playing gigs for \$25 or \$30 and stabbing each other in the back to play these gigs. The seasoned professional guys weren't gonna touch those gigs at all, as they shouldn't.

CM: Just the desperation to play...

TM: Yeah, even bigger name guys were cutting into the young guys' territory just to have a place to work out their projects in public. You were competing not just with your peer set or your strata, but with everybody for those kinds of gigs. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to sort of apprentice with certain people—do the hang—but it wasn't like I thought it would be. I'm sure that sounds like everybody's story.

I had three-night-a-week-gig at this restaurant lobby just playing trio after I worked my job. I got to hire some great musicians. My brother and I had some nice gigs at a couple of venues around town that were fairly regular. I got to play with the Tito Puente Orchestra a couple of times and with Chico O'Farrell a number of times at Birdland. Got to go out and hang and just do the thing, sit in at places, made some friends that were really good musicians and got to play with some great people, stayed really busy.

The thing with my job got weirder and weirder the lon-

ger I stayed there, because I sort of worked my way up in this very small company where all the other employees quit or got fired. Then my boss ended up going to prison and that sort of left me running the company. At that point, I was making a lot of money there. It was one of those things where the more time I spent there, the less I was playing music. With things being so expensive, I wasn't making enough money playing music unless I went back to playing club dates, but that's not what I wanted to do. I ran this company for about 6 months after he went to jail and then trained his wife how to run the business and figured I would quit. I knew that if I quit that job I'd have to either find another job or leave. I really didn't love NY enough to want to stick around. There are things about it that I miss but compared to here since I've been back, it's been probably the most productive two or three years that I've ever had musically.

CM: Since you've been back?

TM: Since I've been back. I knew I could make a living here, either teaching lessons or whatever. I've done pretty well just playing. Obviously there's up and down times, but it's been really good and fruitful. I've got one record out, one coming out in February, another one's coming out in August. I get to play with some really good professional players. There are musicians here that are just as good as anywhere else. There may be more of them in NY, but there are great musicians to work with and learn from here. I can get my ass whipped here just as easy as I can there by people just as good too. I guess that's it about NY in a roundabout way.

CM: So you were in NY from...?

TM: 1999 to 2004

CM: And then how much time did you spend with Maynard?

TM: I guess it was about 8 or 9 months.

CM: So you spent about 4 years just doing the thing in NY?

TM: Yeah, it was really about 5 years. Yeah, about that.

CM: I'm curious what your most memorable NYC moments were.

TM: Well, most of those had to do with my day job actually because it was just such a bizarre job. I'm actually writing a book about it, a 200 page manuscript, that is so unbelievable but it's all true

CM: About being a process server?

TM: About being a process server in NY and the guys that I worked with who were just unbelievably shady. My first day at work they tried to pay me in counterfeit money. It was such a bad scene. It's just a rough job because you have to pretty much lie for a living to get people to open doors to you and second of all people are pretty much lying to you from the get go. It's just this whole web of deceit and you have to learn how to be really good at it. And there's ways to go about being good at it, but they're all completely dishonest.

CM: Any skills that transfer to the music business?

TM: Yeah, well nothing I think I really want to talk about (laughter...)

Just to put it this way, the guys I worked with were the wrong crowd. Because these guys were the wrong crowd, I had access to a lot of things that would sort of ingratiate you to a lot of musicians and I'll just leave it at that (laughter)

But I had a lot of memorable musical experiences. I did a jingle one time that Ray (Vega) sent me to sub on. The jingle thing has really declined. It used to be everybody and their mother would manage to do a couple of jingles a month. It was really good because it was like \$300 for about 10 minutes worth of work. So I get there and it's Randy Brecker, Lou Soloff and Marvin Stamm. The call was for 8 a.m. I wanted to be there at 7:30 but I ended up being there about 10 minutes to 8:00 so I was feeling a little bit rushed. I get there and of course everybody's there and warmed up 'cause we're supposed to start hitting at 8:00. I'm getting my horn set up and my mutes out, kind of buzzing my mouthpiece, haven't even looked at

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the music yet. It's five minutes to 8:00 and everybody's supposedly there...the guy is like "let's try it one time." So I'm just putting my glasses on as he's counting it off, we play through it and it's like 20 seconds of music. We probably played about three quarters of what's on the page and he said "ok, thank you." I look over and everybody's packing up their stuff. And I had just got it all out and I look over at Randy Brecker, "hey like what's going on?" and he says "that's it kid, go home." I said "do I get paid?" and he said "yeah, go to the union hall on Friday." So I go down there and give them my union number and they give me a huge check, it's like \$320 and here comes Randy and he shows his union card and gets a stack of probably 30 checks. I'm sure they're all for \$300 bucks, and I'm like, "wow, that's heavy. Randy's doing okay. Randy's definitely doing okay."

And there'd be times where you'd play some lame dumb gig somewhere and you had no thought in your head about who would show up. Somebody like Rashid Ali would be sitting at the bar, or Duke Jordan would be there, or Wynton Marsalis would come by and want to play. The thing about NYC is that, as opposed to here, there is the possibility for stuff to happen. You could just randomly get called, because you're twenty-third on the list to go do something cool. If you just waited around there long enough, stuff comes your way. After five years living there, I felt like I was getting the work I was going to get and in order to step up to the next level of work, I had to be there another 10 or 15 years. It just wasn't for me to live there that long. I was tired after one year. It's just an exhausting place to live. Get up, go to work, come home, practice, go out. Because you have to go out and meet people and play and hang and go to the jam sessions which start at 2:00 in the morning. So it's not conducive to like relaxing and thinking about stuff creatively but it does definitely give that edge to you.

CM: How do you bring that back to Seattle? What did you bring back with you? And then more importantly, how do you stay motivated in Seattle?

TM: What you bring back is a sense of how good music can be...being part of really great live music.

People in NY are into playing anytime, anyplace if it's something of quality. I think people here get lazy. In terms of being motivated though, this is a great place because there are musicians here where if you say "I've got these 9 tunes that I've written, do you want to get together and play them?" and they're like "yeah, let's get together and play!" Then you get together and play and then "oh jeez, we should get a gig." There's a million places you can play for no money, so you start there and work your project out there. Then you get a gig that pays some money and you can do that. And there's an opportunity to do a little regional touring. There's money

here and the arts are fairly well funded here. There's a lot of money here flowing to the arts organizations.

It's just easier plus like I said, there's really good musicians here. Like I'm doing this gig with Randy Halberstadt and his music is really really hard, I should be practicing it right now. That's incentive enough. On my instrument I have to compete with really, really great people, there's a lot of good trumpet people in town. I want to be working and I have to stay on it because it's competitive. There's only a finite amount of gigs here too, and there's a bunch of us trying to get that work. There's always an incentive to get better.

CM: That's a cool, upbeat take on the Seattle scene. I've been hearing so many people down about it. Ironically it's the same people who are working all the time saying nothing's happening...I wish things could not happen for me the way they're not happening for them.

TM: Right. Well, it's all so relative. It used to be better here.

CM: It used to be better everywhere. Now it's more comfortable to stay home and watch your big monster TV. There's so much more competition for entertainment now instead of getting in a car and going out. It's not the social thing it used to be.

TM: Especially in Seattle which is not a particularly social place, nor a particularly diverse place for that matter. Here people tend to be pretty homogenous in what they're into and they don't really deviate.

CM: That's the thing about playing live music at a time like this, when things are economically fairly healthy, but the landscape's shifting.

TM: I feel like what we do as musicians is such an old school thing. When I play the trumpet, there's no electronics involved, there's no amps, etc. Basically I'm converting food into energy to power the thing, right? And that's extremely old school, not to mention that we're playing music that's old, generally speaking. I feel like it's more of a craft. I feel like it's primarily a matter of craftsmanship, knowing how to structure a solo and how to do all these things, as much as a matter of artistry. The craft part of it has gone out of music completely, you don't have to know any of it, you don't even have to know major scales to be a performer in a lot of genres of music anymore.

But for me, there's a lot of areas of the craft that I am deficient in so there's always somebody putting a mirror up to that. Like when you go play with Hans Teuber or Jeff Johnson. Those guys they make everything sound good, whatever it is they're playing. The hardest stuff, the easy stuff, it doesn't matter. They're always making it sound good, they've got the craft part of it way together. The artistry part comes out of that. I'm sure they have a different opinion about that but from my perspective, they manage to fit in everywhere. That's what musicians are supposed to do. As a professional, if you play music for a living, so you should be able to play all kinds of music on demand, and make it sound good at the same time.

CM: I'm curious about your favorite teachers and your influences, especially recently.

TM: I was roommates with Mandyck off and on from when I was 19 to when I moved away. He's definitely been a large musical influence over the years in terms of how I think about music and learning things. I've probably learned more from him than anybody else. It's not like scales and that kind of stuff at all—it's primarily conceptual. Then

I would say lately, since I've moved home, I've had a chance to play with Jeff Johnson more and he's always been very kind about saying "you know, man, you really should do this." You always learn more when you hang out with musicians than when you study with them. Musicians that you respect, you see what their opinion of music is, or how they conceive of what they're doing. That was the thing with Rick—we'd play a gig and then come home and he'd have a different take on it that I would. Or he'd have a similar opinion but he thought about it a lot differently than I did. That's true for a lot of musicians. Jeff's always been good about sharing what he thinks about the music in general and about how to relate to the music. In a one to one lesson sort of situation, I haven't taken a lot of lessons like that. I studied with Roy Cummings in college. I had my trumpet out of the case about three times in four years because we would talk about all kinds of out stuff 'cause Roy was just like that. I took a few lessons when I was in high school and I took a few lessons when I was in NY more to sort of get to know people. You always have specific questions, or why can't I achieve this thing, or what is that particular thing they are doing.

CM: Where do you get your inspiration?

TM: The musicians I play with. When we did the Willie Nelson Project, I wrote this music which was completely vague on purpose. We got together and played it for the first time, and the guys in the band, Ryan, Jeff, Matt and Mark, they just did what they do and, wow, I never would've thought of any of that stuff. With a whole different set of people, it would've sounded totally different. It's listening to what musicians do, it's being mindful of what musicians do, that's the biggest influence. There's really good musicians here.

CM: Personally, I don't think I would appreciate the musicians here as much if I hadn't spent time in NY. It's more accessible because you can actually talk to somebody like Jeff Johnson. There was always that stuff in NY but most of the time it was way out of reach. It seems like here people, like you said, are motivated by the idea, the gig, the concept, if you can take the steps to get it in motion.

TM: Yeah, in a lot of ways I think people are dying for somebody to come along with something. If you come along with an idea and you decide to act on it, people are usually pretty receptive. They open their arms, "great let's do that...whatever you want to do," if you have the time and the resources to make it happen. It's an easy place to get something happening, which is good. You don't have to take a subway into town and rent a rehearsal space and try to cram a rehearsal into an hour for a gig that's 3 hours. It's a lot easier here. Everything's a lot easier here.

CM: Yeah, just don't tell anybody. I know for myself the whole wanderlust of wondering how things are elsewhere is gone.

TM: Yeah, exactly. I know what it's about now.

CM: But you gotta go through that stress and pain and exhilaration

TM: You certainly do. It's like homework. It's like in the Odyssey where he goes through the trials and tribulations only to find himself right back where he started. Where he started from is not different but it's that he is different. That's something we all need to do from time to time, I think. Just to sort of refresh ourselves, to renew ourselves because things don't change that much but you certainly can.

I went back there with Tumbao for a couple of gigs in NY last May, and I stayed at my sister's in Queens, which was like 2 blocks from where I used to lived. I knew the neighborhood and I knew how to get to the gig because I'd played the venues before. It was basically like being teleported two years back in time to exactly where I was before and I was thinking about how my lifestyle is now versus where it was then. Man, I'm so spoiled. At home, I put my horns in the car, drive to the gig, and set up, play, don't have to worry about nothing. Because that's how it is. I'm really happy I moved home. Yeah, it's good here. Life is good here. ■

