

INTERPRETIVE PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES AND LYRICAL INNOVATIONS ON THE  
BASS TROMBONE: A STUDY OF RECORDED PERFORMANCES BY  
GEORGE ROBERTS, "MR. BASS TROMBONE"

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Nicknamed "Mr. Bass Trombone" for his role as a prominent, trailblazing recording artist, George Roberts (b. 1928) has often been recognized as redefining the role of the bass trombone in popular music as well as setting new standards for technical refinement and expressive possibilities of the instrument. Through two interviews and a comparison between ten recorded performances by Roberts and corresponding lead sheets, I make observations about Roberts' performance techniques and illustrate various examples of those techniques. The document includes 35 pp. of interview transcriptions.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background, Significance, and Purpose

Musical language is based on tradition, as is any language. A composition or performance must relate in some way to what has come before in order to be understood by listeners. To be recognized as a lasting influence, a musician must create something new or improved in a language that may be comprehended by others. Most musicians attempt to emulate the finest in their field to some degree. That is, musicians learn from those whom they consider to be the best at conveying thought or emotion through music.

Nicknamed “Mr. Bass Trombone” for his role as a prominent, trailblazing recording artist, George Roberts (b. 1928) has often been recognized as defining the role of the bass trombone in popular music and setting new standards for technical refinement and expressive possibilities of the instrument. In addition to being featured on many Nelson Riddle, Stan Kenton, and Frank Sinatra recordings, Roberts has also played important roles in recordings by Ella Fitzgerald, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dean Martin, and others. As Craig Gosnell has shown in his doctoral essay, Roberts took an instrument that was previously accepted as simply a “root and fifth” instrument and turned it into a singing voice that was quickly noticed and utilized by jazz and

commercial arrangers and producers.<sup>1</sup> His playing may be heard on literally thousands of movie soundtracks and several solo albums, and classical bass trombonists Ben van Dijk and Douglas Yeo have each recorded tribute works in Roberts' honor.<sup>2</sup>

Roberts' influence beyond the realm of commercial music is made clear by several comments by van Dijk. Van Dijk is the bass trombonist for the Rotterdam Philharmonic and teaches at the Rotterdam Conservatory and the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England. He calls Roberts the "maestro" of bass trombone and states that Roberts "was the reason" he seriously pursued the instrument. According to van Dijk, the bass trombone was not "recognized as a full instrument" in Holland when he was a tenor trombone student during the early 1970s, and conservatories did not offer instruction on the instrument.

While at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague, van Dijk was introduced to recordings of the Nelson Riddle, Stan Kenton, and Henry Mancini orchestras, most of which were made with Roberts playing bass trombone. Van Dijk stated, "I really liked the sound he made, so relaxed, singing and swinging!" He found himself drawn to the bass trombone after hearing Roberts. Van Dijk's enthusiasm for the bass trombone did not end with commercial music, however, as he became the first trombonist in Holland to graduate with a bass trombone diploma. Van Dijk states that he "always kept the sound of Mr. Bass Trombone in my mind," which he describes as "free[-]singing, open,

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<sup>1</sup> Craig R. Gosnell, "George Roberts (b. 1928): Mr. Bass Trombone: A Doctoral Essay" (DMA diss., University of Miami, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Van Dijk, "Mr. Roberts," composed by Ilja Reijngoud, *Nana*, Ben van Dijk BVD 2000-1, 2000, compact disc; Douglas Yeo, "Tribute to George Roberts," arranged by Bill Geldard, and "Blue Topaz," composed by Tommy Pederson, *Proclamation*, Doyen DOY CD 055, 1996, compact disc.



and relaxed,” and that he tries to play with a similar sound when performing classical music.<sup>3</sup>

Bob Hughes, who has been a member of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Philharmonia Orchestra, and the London Symphony Orchestra, also acknowledged Roberts’ importance. He stated that it is debatable whether Roberts has had a direct influence on classical playing, but he believes that all bass trombonists who have heard Roberts’ playing have been strongly affected by it. He also holds that Roberts’ musical qualities “have played a major role in raising the standard of bass trombone playing in all styles of music to where it is today.” In Hughes’ opinion,

. . . he makes probably the best sound on the instrument. Focused with real core, warm, fruity, perfectly weighted[,] with great intonation. His feel and style are wonderfully relaxed and flowing.

Because of these qualities, Hughes believes it is “no wonder arrangers featured him so much.” Further, Hughes stated that Roberts “was the first player to [make him aware of] the real solo and melodic possibilities of the bass trombone.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Yeo, bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and faculty member of the New England Conservatory, “There is no denying that George Roberts has had a great impact on symphonic bass trombone players.” First learning of Roberts in high school, Yeo “was captivated” by Roberts’ sound and phrasing. He wrote, “No other trombonist—bass or tenor—seemed to approach the beauty of tone and nuanced style that he had.” Roberts later became a role model for Yeo when Yeo was an aspiring orchestral musician.

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Van Dijk, electronic correspondence with Yeager, 3 September 2006.

Yeo also noted that his CD of hymn tune and gospel song arrangements, *Cornerstone*, was directly influenced by Roberts' style, and he indicated that aspects of Roberts' playing can be heard clearly in his own playing when serving as a member of the Boston Pops Orchestra. Yeo stated, "Hardly a day goes by when I don't listen to George play something," and suggested that performers of any style music should emulate Roberts, both in performing and in character.<sup>5</sup>

Most research pertaining to Roberts has entailed interviews with him about his life and career. Although several authors have produced biographical documents, there is very little written about Roberts' playing. This document is intended to serve as a tool that will aid performers in understanding and emulating Roberts' interpretive approach. Through an examination of several recorded performances, this study will identify, compile, explain, and illustrate the array of techniques that enables Roberts to achieve unique, personalized, and spontaneous-sounding interpretations. In order to direct the focus of this project, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

How does Roberts interpret and manipulate rhythms?

When does Roberts add ornaments, and what are the usual characteristics of these ornaments?

When, why, and how does Roberts simplify musical passages?

When and why does Roberts play music in an octave different from the one written?

What is Roberts' process to decide proper phrasing? Is there a process?

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Hughes, electronic correspondence with Yeager, 8 September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Yeo, *Cornerstone*, Die letzte Posaune CD 83175, 2000, compact disc; Douglas Yeo, electronic correspondence with Yeager, 30 September 2006. For full message from Yeo, see Appendix 3.

How much does Roberts vary articulation in a solo performance?

What is Roberts' general dynamic range when performing a solo?

How does Roberts manage rubato playing? How does he manage rubato playing when the background is pre-recorded?

How much of a given performance does Roberts plan ahead of time, and how much is spontaneous?

### State of Research

Several documents have focused on George Roberts' life and career. Two articles that have focused mainly on Roberts' life include a transcription of an interview by Bill Spilka<sup>6</sup> and a two-part article by Elecia Hill,<sup>7</sup> which drew upon the Spilka article. Another source relevant to Roberts is Michael Millar's set of interviews of Los Angeles studio musicians and the excerpt from this set that was published as an article in the *ITA Journal*.<sup>8</sup> Craig Gosnell's doctoral essay entitled "George Roberts (b. 1928): Mr. Bass Trombone"<sup>9</sup> was primarily based upon three interviews with Roberts by Gosnell and the article by E. Hill. Finally, the most recent source is a broad interview that has been published online by Paul Hill.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> George M. Roberts, "An Interview with George Roberts," interview by Bill Spilka, transcribed by Helen Pajama (March 1984?), *New York Brass Conference for Scholarships*, 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Edition (1984): 32-35.

<sup>7</sup> Elecia Hill, "George Roberts: Tribute to a Legend," *ITA Journal* 16, no. 1 (1988): 22-30.

<sup>8</sup> Michael W. Millar, "Los Angeles Studio Brass Players," DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999; Michael W. Millar, "George Roberts: Tribute & Conversation," *ITA Journal* 27, no. 1 (1999): 40-45.

<sup>9</sup> Craig R. Gosnell, "George Roberts (b. 1928): Mr. Bass Trombone: A Doctoral Essay" (DMA diss., University of Miami, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> George M. Roberts, "Interview with George Roberts," interview by Paul Hill (Coronado Ferry Landing, 12 August 2004), *Online Trombone Journal* (published 8 November 2004), <http://www.trombone.org/articles/library/viewarticles.asp?ArtID=257> (retrieved 8 March 2005).

In summary, the sources by Spilka, E. Hill, and Gosnell can all be classified as biographical; Millar’s documents are historical; and P. Hill’s interview is a broad overview of many topics. The body of literature now available emphasizes the historical aspects of Roberts’ influence, but it fails to explore the perceived uniqueness of his playing. In other words, we know what Roberts has done for the bass trombone, but we know little about how he has done it.

### Method

The primary materials for this study were lead sheets, sound recordings by Roberts using similar lead sheets, and two interviews I conducted with him. The recordings represented a variety of tempi and styles spanning Roberts’ solo career. Pieces were selected from the albums *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone* (1969), *I’ll Play for You Forever* (1993), *Big Band Ballads for Trombone* (1998), *Unsung Hero* (1998), and included an original composition by Roberts, “Walkin’” (ca. 1958).<sup>11</sup> *Big Band Ballads* and *Unsung Hero* were considered as one album since they were recorded in the same time frame and for the same purpose. The resulting list of recordings was:

From the single including “Nel Blu Di Pinto Di Blu” and “Walkin’:  
“Walkin’” Swing 4/4 MM ca. 104

From *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone*:

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<sup>11</sup> Nelson Riddle, “Nel Blu Di Pinto Di Blu” and “Walkin’” (“Walkin’” composed by George Roberts), Capitol F 4024, 1958[?], 7-inch single; George Roberts, “Walkin’,” lead sheet and musical score, 1958[?], Nelson Riddle Collection, University of Arizona, Tucson, Az; Nelson Riddle, *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone*, Practice Makes Perfect, Rumson Music, 1969, sound disc and printed solo parts; George Roberts and Rob Boone, *I’ll Play for You Forever*, Rob Boone, Tucson, AZ, 1993, cassette and printed solo parts; George Roberts and the Music Minus One Orchestra, *Big Band Ballads for Trombone: Complete Performance plus Orchestral Accompaniments*, Music Minus One MMO CD 3907, 1998, compact disc and printed solo parts; and George Roberts and the Music Minus One Orchestra, *Unsung Hero: The Artistry of George Roberts*, Music Minus One MMO CD 3906, 1998, compact disc and printed solo parts.

"Part 3"	Straight 3/4	MM ca. 39 (dotted half)
"Part 4"	Straight 5/4	MM 76-104
"Part 5"	Straight 4/4	MM ca. 162

From *I'll Play for You Forever*:

"Alone Together"	Latin	4/4	MM ca. 94
"Lament"	Ballad	4/4	MM ca. 75
"Send In the Clowns"	Ballad	12/8	MM ca. 48

From *Big Band Ballads* and *Unsung Hero*:

"Steppin' Out with My Baby"	Swing	4/4	MM ca. 174
"One for My Baby"	Swing	4/4	MM ca. 118
"Stardust"	Swing	4/4	MM ca. 56

The recorded performances were transcribed and compared with corresponding lead sheets with regard to Roberts' alterations of written pitches, register, and rhythm, and other aspects such as vibrato, *time feel*,<sup>12</sup> rubato, dynamics, and articulation. Pervasive, unique features of his performances were identified along with their contexts.

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase "time feel," as it is used here, shall be defined as the metric accent and even or uneven subdivision of the beat and a typically intentional, but often subconscious, synchronicity of rhythmic events or lack thereof. Examples include the jazz tradition of swinging eighth notes and soloists' practice of intentionally placing notes later than other performers in an ensemble.

## CHAPTER 2

### INTERVIEW AND STUDY

#### Tone, Voice, and Concept

##### Roberts' Decision to Play Bass Trombone

Roberts started his professional career on the tenor trombone. I asked Roberts what most people's concept of the bass trombone was when he decided to switch from tenor to bass trombone. He referred to Bart Varsalona with Stan Kenton's band and described him as a "loud, bombastic, strong player." Roberts also stated, "it's always been a root and fifth—you know, 'Peanut Vendor,' 'Intermission Riff,'—this kind of a horn, always."<sup>13</sup>

Roberts decided to play the bass trombone when he was part of Gene Krupa's band. As a performer, he was highly impressed with the lead trombone player, Urbie Green. Roberts freely states that he decided that in order to have a successful performing career, he should avoid competing against trombonists who played like Green:

I don't play that way—like that powerful, and that high and all that stuff, but I do have a better lower register and I thought, "Wait a minute! Bart Varsalona with Kenton . . . Urbie plays these gorgeous ballads and things with Krupa. . . Why can't you do bass trombone like Urbie an octave lower within reason and

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<sup>13</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

become a ballad player? . . . I wonder if I would be smart to switch to bass trombone and try to turn it into a different kind of a horn."<sup>14</sup>

After switching to the bass trombone, Roberts was able to build a highly successful career, earning the nickname "Mr. Bass Trombone," and leaving a model of bass trombone playing for generations to come. He later stated that he thought switching to bass trombone "was the smartest move I ever made."<sup>15</sup>

### Sound and Projection

In our interviews, Roberts made a strong connection between playing the trombone and singing, and he referred to vocal models for trombone playing. In fact, Roberts connects singing and trombone playing so strongly that he often refers to them synonymously. In our conversations, Roberts made statements such as:

Sinatra, to me, was the greatest trombone teacher in the world.<sup>16</sup>

. . . as a musician, I would love to be able to play trombone like Sarah [Vaughan]. [I'd] like to play trombone like Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, Nat Cole, Ella [Fitzgerald].<sup>17</sup>

Some kid asked Bill Watrous the other day and said, "What do you think of George Roberts' playing?" He said, "What kind of a player do you think he is?" He [Watrous] says, "He's a vocalist!" That was Watrous's interpretation of me—"He's a vocalist!" Perfect. That's just what I want him to say.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Roberts, "An Interview with George Roberts," interview by Spilka, 33.

<sup>16</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

According to Roberts, vocal playing on the bass trombone is accomplished in the male vocal range, and it sounds easy, with a soft, velvety, projecting sound.<sup>19</sup>

Roberts' light, projecting sound has often been praised and, through its wide exposure, has helped define the characteristic bass trombone sound. Roberts always has been adamant that the bass trombone is "not a baritone or a tuba or something bigger than what it is. It's still a resonant, projecting instrument, like a tenor trombone."<sup>20</sup> This concept of the bass trombone was not always the case. Shortly after Roberts switched to the bass trombone, Urbie Green commented to him, "You're the only one who makes it sound like a *trombone*."<sup>21</sup>

Roberts relies on efficient resonance more than volume to carry his sound. In these recordings, he usually played in the soft- to middle-dynamic range, often between *piano* and *mezzo forte*. I commented to him that he is able to achieve a tone that is not only velvety, but it also has direction to it. He responded:

I always understood that you get the most beautiful sound that you can, and then you put that sound in the back of the auditorium, not right around you, yourself. You try to project that sound to the back of the auditorium—not loud—and that means resonance and sound. The resonance is going to take you right to the back wall of that auditorium. Projection—like a singer.<sup>22</sup>

Roberts' resonance has not only enabled him to project at soft volumes, but it has also served him well when the music has required more volume. Speaking of a movie recording session he played alongside fellow first-call studio trombonist Lloyd Ulyate,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



Roberts stated:

We would have a vicious, vicious date on some massive space killer-thon or whatever you call the thing, where everybody's blowing everything up and we're playing loud—well, like *King Kong*, like *bahm-bahm-bahm*, playing loud—I mean *loud*—and Lloyd would come back out and sit down and say, "Damn you, George!" He said, "I sit out here, and I blow my head off!" He said, "I'm working my tail off, right to the bone!" And he said, "I can't even see you or hear you sitting here in the section, and I went into the booth, and all I can hear is you!"<sup>23</sup>

I mentioned to Roberts that he had received similar comments before, and I asked about a particular instance when Roberts was playing in Stan Kenton's band. He stated:

Yes. Well, Stan went up to Milt Bernhart [another member of the trombone section] when I first went on Kenton's band, and Stan said, "What do you think of George?" And Milt said, "Well, he doesn't play very loud," and he [Kenton] said, "Milt, . . . Go on the other side of the auditorium, and listen to the band, and all I can hear is him [meaning Roberts]." That's projection and sound. You always look to the other side of the room—not directly in front of you—to the other side of the room. And you close your eyes and play beautiful notes, and project them out as far as you can, like a vocalist would do.<sup>24</sup>

Again, Roberts emphasized the vocal connection to playing the bass trombone. The fact that statements about singing and vocalists permeate his discussion of trombone playing indicates the level to which he mentally connects the two activities.

## Vibrato

Roberts incorporates a combination of head vibrato and slide vibrato in his playing. Head vibrato is executed by a slight movement of the head, disturbing the embouchure and the interaction between it and the instrument. There may also be a disturbance of the air stream with this type of vibrato. Roberts stated, "I kind of almost

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

just, I think, shake my head a little bit, just so there's a slight motion to it. And that's the way Frank [Sinatra] did a lot of it."<sup>25</sup>

Roberts accomplishes slide vibrato by moving the slide above and below the slide position for a given pitch. He indicated that his slide vibrato is not very wide, and described it as, "Not that *big* a thing, . . . and the slide is actually not leaving the position where it is. It's just, I'm kind of moving the horn—almost like I'm moving my head."<sup>26</sup>

Roberts' execution of vibrato depends on musical factors. Modeling his vibrato after that of popular vocalists such as Sinatra, Roberts may begin a note with vibrato, but if a note is longer than two beats, Roberts will more likely hold the note steadily before ending it with vibrato and a decrescendo. Roberts also changes the speed of his vibrato based on the register in which he is playing. As he stated, "If you play a low E-flat with a vibrato as fast as Tommy Dorsey played, it would sound *terrible*. You'd sound like a nervous wreck. . . . It would be *terrible*."<sup>27</sup> Even in the high register, Roberts does not make his vibrato especially quick:

I never play fast, fast vibrato. The sound [of the bass trombone] doesn't call for a fast, fast vibrato. It doesn't sound right in the area where the horn is written ninety percent of the time. And in the vocal range, where you're in middle-low range, fast vibrato just sounds awful.<sup>28</sup>

Based on a video recording made in 1994,<sup>29</sup> Roberts will almost always use slide

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> George Roberts, video recording, 19 February 1994.

vibrato, often combined with head vibrato. It is seldom that Roberts uses head vibrato alone, but when he does, it is generally for first-position notes such as low B-flat or F in the bass-clef staff. His vibrato is fairly consistently applied, almost always before a breath, but seldom before the last note of a phrase.

### Consistency, "Alone Together," and Improvisation

Roberts indicated that he generally does not plan the execution of a performance to any great extent. I asked Roberts to examine copies of the sheet music for "Alone Together" and "Send In the Clowns,"<sup>30</sup> on which I indicated changes he made to the written music during his recorded performances. I then played excerpts of the recordings and asked for his comments.

Although Roberts may not plan the performance of a given tune to any great extent, he generally plays similar passages in a similar way. Roberts stated that he often uses a trial-and-error method to settle into general interpretations, although this process may not occur consciously. After a performance, Roberts might say to himself, "I didn't like the way I did it the last time, so I'll change it," but I don't think too much about that. It just happens. It happens, you know."<sup>31</sup> When asked about how much he changes interpretations between performances, Roberts responded:

There are very, very subtle changes, I think, all the time. I think that happens all the time. You never play it the same twice. I don't think consciously about what I'm going to change and stuff. What happens happens. Like the phrasing part, if I felt like I didn't like what I did, I'll change it. I think about that, but not an

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<sup>30</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*.

<sup>31</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.

awful lot, you know. I don't think ahead about things like that. What happens at the time is when I do it.<sup>32</sup>

This statement indicates that, aside from minor changes, Roberts exhibits a certain degree of consistency in his performances.

I played excerpts of Roberts' recording of "Alone Together,"<sup>33</sup> the tune in which he exhibited the greatest amount of freedom with regard to the notated pitches. During the section marked "swing," Roberts not only manipulated rhythms, but also added notes. For instance, he added a short phrase of eighth notes in measures 28-29 to the point where the written music appears very different from the transcription:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for measures 26-29 of the song "Alone Together". The top staff is labeled "Lead Sheet" and the bottom staff is labeled "Transcription". Both staves are in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). Measure 26 is marked "Swing". The lead sheet shows a melodic line with slurs and triplets in measures 27 and 28. The transcription follows the lead sheet but includes additional eighth notes in measures 28 and 29, indicated by wavy lines and a greater-than sign (>). Measure numbers 26, 27, 28, and 29 are written above the lead sheet staff.

Fig. 1. "Alone Together," mm. 26-29.

"Alone Together" lyrics by Howard Dietz; music by Arthur Schwartz.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*.

Roberts also inserted a low F and a C to measure 32:



Fig. 2. "Alone Together," mm. 32-33.

"Alone Together" lyrics by Howard Dietz; music by Arthur Schwartz.

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Although jazz musicians often change melodies much more than Roberts did in this example, he strayed from the notated music more in this recording than in any of the others examined. When asked if he improvised the phrase in mm. 28-29 or if he worked it out before recording, Roberts replied that the phrase was added spontaneously as a response to measure 26 because, "It seemed natural, . . . and I didn't think ahead about doing it."<sup>34</sup>

Since Roberts exhibited an especially high degree of spontaneity in this recording, I asked him about his experience with improvisation. He responded:

I've never gotten myself involved in jazz. I did when I was going through the music school at the beginning, and I played some jazz and stuff. And I went out on the road with bands, and I started reading, and I'd spent a whole, like, seventy-some years reading notes. That's what I've spent my life [doing]—never

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

play[ing] jazz. I've been too involved in *reading*, like motion-pictures and television—stuff like that. I've spent a whole lifetime of reading music and phrasing, and trying to phrase the best way that I can, and that's where song comes in. Even like on a motion-picture call, I like to phrase my background lines that they would [write]. . . . I wasn't an out-and-out jazz-with-a-chord-line-and-stuff [kind of player].<sup>35</sup>

He also explained that eventually he chose not to attempt to have a career in improvisation:

. . . if you're going to play jazz, you've got to live with the jazz all the time. You can't just once every forty years stand up and play a jazz chorus. That would be so stagnant, it would be terrible. So I never did that. I stayed pretty close to home, you know.<sup>36</sup>

In the notable instance when Roberts was offered a solo over chord changes, he did plan it out ahead of time. Before participating in the recording session for "Makin' Whoopee" with Frank Sinatra and Nelson Riddle, Riddle asked Roberts if he wanted to play some jazz behind Sinatra. In this case, Riddle was able to send some sheet music and chord changes to Roberts ahead of time, and to prepare, Roberts planned a solo at home, with his wife playing piano.<sup>37</sup>

Some people may debate whether Roberts is a "jazz" musician. Although there are a few cases of short improvisation by Roberts, these cases are rare. His playing mainly reflects the spontaneous playing of improvisatory jazz musicians through its rhythmic freedom and occasional ornamentation.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## Ornamentation

### Scoops, Bends, Glissandi, and Falls<sup>38</sup>

*Scoops.* Roberts' primary ornament is the scoop, which appeared to be capriciously incorporated in these recordings. A trend became apparent when observing the notes to which Roberts scooped. Roberts scooped liberally to notes that could be played in first and second positions, less often to third-position notes, rarely to fourth-position notes, and scoops to fifth-position notes were not heard.<sup>39</sup> This observation indicates that the physical aspects of playing the trombone come into play where scoops were concerned. That is, Roberts was more likely to add scoops where they felt physically natural.

*Bends, Glissandi, and Falls.* Other types of manipulations of pitch Roberts used in these recordings included bends, glissandi, and falls. Of the selected recordings, Roberts sometimes used bends to add variety to repeated notes. Examples of this kind

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<sup>38</sup> For the purposes of this document, a glissando is defined as a continuous slide between two notes, in either the upward or downward direction; a scoop is defined as a slide from an undefined pitch to a higher, specific pitch, usually beginning before the note's indicated rhythmic placement and arriving at the specified pitch at the note's indicated placement; a fall is a slide from a specific note down to an undefined pitch; and a bend is a quick, momentary lowering of a note followed by a return to the original pitch.

<sup>39</sup> One of the features of the bass trombone and some other trombones is that certain notes that would otherwise be played far away from the player's body, in sixth and seventh positions, may be played in first and second positions when a valve is activated. Playing notes in positions that are closer to the body is generally more comfortable and often technically easier. The approximate numbers of scoops were 74 in first position, 70 in second position, 22 in third position, 6 in fourth position, and 0 in fifth position. Given the clear, descending order of third-, fourth-, and fifth-position scoops, Roberts most likely played notes in first or second positions when an option to play lower- or higher-number positions was present.

of bend may be heard in "Send In the Clowns" and "Alone Together."<sup>40</sup> Roberts rarely incorporated many glissandi in a given tune except in Riddle's "Part 3" and "Part 4."<sup>41</sup> With the exception of measure 42 in "Walkin',"<sup>42</sup> all glissandi in the selections observed moved in the downward direction.<sup>43</sup> Roberts only added two falls: one in "Alone Together" and one in "Lament."<sup>44</sup> The instances of added falls are too rare to come to conclusions about how Roberts applies them.

#### Added Notes

*Octave Grace Notes.* Roberts stated, "I don't like to add a lot of fast things. I don't like to be too busy."<sup>45</sup> Consistent with this statement, Roberts generally does not add many notes to the notated music. An example of an ornament that Roberts does commonly use and one that makes his playing identifiable is the grace note an octave below the written note. With the exception of the Nelson Riddle quintets, he uses this type of ornament in most tunes in this study. Two typical examples of this ornament may be heard in "Send In the Clowns" and "One for My Baby:"<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*: "Send In the Clowns," mm. 4, 19, 41; "Alone Together" mm. 20 (1<sup>st</sup> time), 40, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Nelson Riddle, *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone*, Practice Makes Perfect, Rumson Music, 1969, sound disc and printed solo parts.

<sup>42</sup> Riddle, "Walkin'," composed by George Roberts.

<sup>43</sup> Roberts' placement of downward glissandi in "Part 3" was very consistent. In "Walkin'," Roberts adds glissandi down in m. 38 down to a low D, but re-articulates D, then down to an F in the same fashion two measures later. These instances are not considered falls because they end on a definite pitch.

<sup>44</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*: "Alone Together" m. 26; "Lament" m. 8.

<sup>45</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts and Boone, "Send In the Clowns," *I'll Play for You Forever*; Roberts, "One for My Baby," *Big Band Ballads*.





Fig. 3. *Left*, "Send In the Clowns," mm. 8-9; *right*, "One for My Baby," mm. 62-63.  
 "Send In the Clowns" (From *A Little Night Music*) by Stephen Sondheim.  
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All such grace notes in the examined recordings are similar to the above examples in that they always occur after a breath.

Sometimes, Roberts will alter notes present on the sheet music to create the same effect. For example, in "Lament," he changed the low A's in the similar measures 9 and 25 to pedals, turning the A's into octave grace notes:<sup>47</sup>

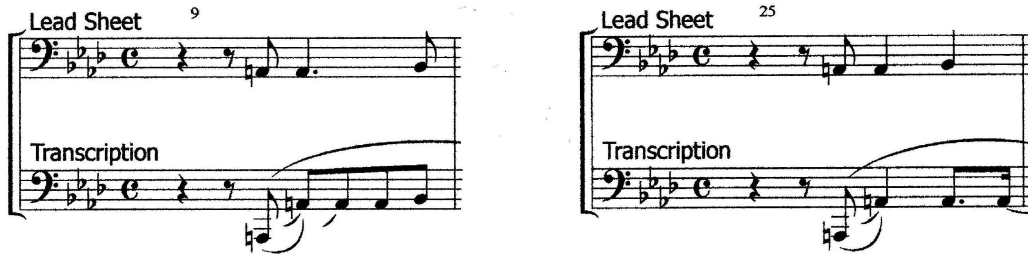


Fig. 4. "Lament." *Left*, m. 9; *right*, m. 25.  
 "Lament" by J. J. Johnson.  
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<sup>47</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*.

Roberts achieved the same effect in mm. 16 and 32 of “One for My Baby” by anticipating the first eighth note and lowering it by an octave:<sup>48</sup>

Fig. 5. “One for My Baby.” *Left*, m. 16; *right*, m. 32.

When asked about when he uses this grace note, Roberts said it was “just [to] kind of *push* a note,” agreeing that it was used to add variety.<sup>49</sup> He also stated, “A tenor trombone player doesn’t do that. That’s a bass trombone innuendo—an octave thing. That shows what horn you’re playing.”<sup>50</sup>

*F-Major Arpeggio.* An unexpected finding about the recordings was Roberts’ use of notes from the F-Major triad as a tool for ornamentation.<sup>51</sup> Two tunes where this type of ornamentation is apparent are “Lament” and “Alone Together,”<sup>52</sup> where Roberts inserted quick C’s into notated A’s, like an upper-neighbor third:

<sup>48</sup> Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*.

<sup>49</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>50</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>51</sup> The F-maj. arpeggio is very natural on trombone since F in the bass clef staff can be played in first position, A in second, and middle C in third.

<sup>52</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I’ll Play for You Forever*.

Fig. 6. *Top*, "Alone Together," m. 14; *bottom*, "Lament," mm. 27-28.  
 "Alone Together" lyrics by Howard Dietz; music by Arthur Schwartz.  
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 "Lament" by J. J. Johnson.  
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In mm. 34 and 50, of "Lament," Roberts added the notes C and A descending to the notated F:<sup>53</sup>

Fig. 7. "Lament." *Left*, mm. 34-35; *right*, mm. 50-51.  
 "Lament" by J. J. Johnson.  
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<sup>53</sup> Another possible instance in which Roberts uses the F-Major arpeggio is the first time through m. 16 of "Alone Together." Roberts inserts a ghosted note into the notated A. An F would fit into the harmony and be a natural note to add, requiring little movement of the slide.

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*Adding Other Types of Notes or Changing Notes for Variety.* Roberts sometimes changed notes to avoid excessive repetition. For instance, every time Roberts inserted a pedal A-flat grace note in "Send In the Clowns," he also changed the following E-flat to an F.<sup>54</sup> In "Alone Together," Roberts avoided the exact repetition present in mm. 13-14 and 15-16 by inserting low A's both times through measure 15:<sup>55</sup>



Fig. 8. "Alone Together," m. 15.

"Alone Together" lyrics by Howard Dietz; music by Arthur Schwartz.

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In his own composition, "Walkin',"<sup>56</sup> Roberts added an ornament unique to that tune. In m. 35, he inserted an upper neighbor between two eighth note A's in m. 35, with glissandi between the notes. This change foreshadowed the triplet figure in 39, but that one is articulated with the valve. Roberts repeated this triplet glissando ornament in m. 42:

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<sup>54</sup> See Fig. 3.

<sup>55</sup> "Send In the Clowns" and "Alone Together" from Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*.

<sup>56</sup> Riddle, "Walkin'," composed by George Roberts.

The image shows three pairs of musical staves for the song "Walkin'". Each pair consists of a "Lead Sheet" and a "Transcription".

- Top left:** Lead Sheet m. 35 and Transcription m. 35. The transcription includes a triplet of eighth notes.
- Top right:** Lead Sheet m. 39 and Transcription m. 39. The transcription includes a triplet of eighth notes.
- Bottom:** Lead Sheet m. 42 and Transcription m. 42. The transcription includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Fig. 9. "Walkin'." *Top left*, m. 35; *top right*, m. 39; *bottom*, m. 42.

In "Send In the Clowns,"<sup>57</sup> Roberts added ghosted sixteenth notes in m. 36, expanding on the idea in m. 19:

The image shows two pairs of musical staves for the song "Send In the Clowns". Each pair consists of a "Lead Sheet" and a "Transcription".

- Left:** Lead Sheet m. 19 and Transcription m. 19. The transcription includes a note marked "Slightly delayed." and a note marked "Not audible." with an 'x' over it.
- Right:** Lead Sheet m. 36 and Transcription m. 36. The transcription includes a note marked "Slightly delayed." and a note marked "Not audible." with an 'x' over it.

Fig. 10. "Send In the Clowns." *Left*, m. 19; *right*, m. 36.

"Send In the Clowns" (From *A Little Night Music*) by Stephen Sondheim.

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<sup>57</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*.

## Simplification

Roberts stated, "When it gets too busy, I go the other way. . . ."<sup>58</sup> When asked about recording *I'll Play for You Forever*, he commented, "I'm going to play it pretty much straight, what he wrote, maybe add or delete a couple notes. If it gets too busy, I'll delete some notes."<sup>59</sup> One example of this scenario is "Send In the Clowns."<sup>60</sup>

The image displays two examples of musical notation for the song "Send In the Clowns". Each example consists of a "Lead Sheet" and a "Transcription".

The top example covers measures 24 and 25. The Lead Sheet shows a bass clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a time signature of 12/8. The lyrics are: "[ Don't you love farce? My fault I fear. ]". The Transcription below it shows a simplified version of the melody, with a "Strong." dynamic marking under the second measure.

The bottom example covers measure 33. The Lead Sheet shows a bass clef, a key signature of two flats, and a time signature of 12/8. The lyrics are: "[ Who could for - see I'd come to ]". The Transcription below it shows a simplified version of the melody.

Fig. 11. "Send In the Clowns." *Top*, mm. 24-25; *bottom*, m. 33.  
"Send In the Clowns" (From *A Little Night Music*) by Stephen Sondheim.  
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<sup>58</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*.

When I asked him about measures 24 and 33, he replied, “. . . what I deleted were things that I felt got too busy. It doesn’t fit the tune.”<sup>61</sup> In fact, the only notes that Roberts deleted were ones added by the arranger.

### Playing In an Octave Different From the One Notated

Since the bass trombone’s natural register is lower than that of the tenor trombone, Roberts has always taken advantage of the instrument’s low range in order to distinguish it as a different instrument. When asked why he would play notes or passages in an octave different from the one written, Roberts responded:

I don’t know. Just the time. There again, like, I’ll pick out what to do at the time that I’m playing. I might feel like, “Well, this would be nice up an octave,” but not a real high, high “up an octave.” If it’s up too high, I probably won’t play it. I like to stay at home base with bass trombone, in the staff, and probably really not get much above an F or a G in the staff [probably meaning in the octave just above the staff] with ballads and things like that. Stan Kenton liked to have me play high D’s and stuff. That’s, you know, like Maynard Ferguson. I don’t want to be Maynard Ferguson. I’m going to play a low D, where I belong, you know. . . . There are other people that play those high notes better than I do. Why do I want to play up there? I’ll play what I’m supposed to, where I belong.<sup>62</sup>

An example of this use of low notes is the octave grace note. Another example is Roberts’ practice of ending tunes with pedal tones, such as Roberts’ short pedal G for the last note of “One for My Baby” or his long pedal tones at the ends of “Send In the Clowns” and “Lament.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> “One for My Baby” from Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*; “Send In the Clowns” and “Lament” from Roberts and Boone, *I’ll Play for You Forever*.

The last measures of "Lament"<sup>64</sup> might be an example of what Roberts referred to as "too high."<sup>65</sup> Roberts showed that he is quite capable of playing high by playing mm. 45-48 of "Lament" in the octave written, but he lowered the last four measures an octave, including the final low F:

Fig. 12. "Lament," mm. 45-52.

"Lament" by J. J. Johnson.

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Roberts could have played the F where it was written very naturally, making the last note one octave lower than the previous one, but he chose to maintain the two-octave interval, likely because he felt that the pedal F was an appropriate final note for this

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.



tune. About the sustained pedal tones at the end of tunes such as in “Lament,” and “Send In the Clowns,” Roberts stated:

It’s like a breath, and that pedal tone had better be really soft and pure and straight ahead. . . . If you play it loud, you’ve destroyed the whole tune. And that’s like Frank [Sinatra] just [Roberts exhales] breathing on the end of a song. And you can play an E-flat pedal tone just softer than anything, and it’s—it works every time I’ve ever done it on a tune. Like, play an F pedal tone or something like that on the end of a tune. . . . but you’ve *got* to play them soft. Even the pedal tone has to be vocal. No other instrument does that—what bass trombone can do, if you play it like a bass trombone. . . .<sup>66</sup>

### Manipulation of Rhythms

There appear to be three fundamental types of rhythmic alteration in Roberts’ playing aside from simply swinging rhythms in a jazz style. The first type of rhythmic alteration is a dramatic drawing out of notes and phrases in order to build a sense of anticipation. “Send In the Clowns”<sup>67</sup> is permeated with this type of alteration:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the first four measures of "Send In the Clowns". The top staff is labeled "Lead Sheet" and the bottom staff is labeled "Transcription". Both staves are in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 12/8 time signature. The lead sheet shows a simple melody with notes and rests. The transcription shows the same melody but with various rhythmic alterations: slurs over notes, wavy lines under notes, and a long horizontal line under a note in measure 4, indicating a significant delay or "drawn out" note. Measure numbers 3, 4, and 5 are indicated above the lead sheet staff.

Fig. 13. “Send In the Clowns,” mm. 2-5.  
“Send In the Clowns” (from *A Little Night Music*) by Stephen Sondheim.  
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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I’ll Play for You Forever*.

This type of delay can be also be heard in "Alone Together:"<sup>68</sup>

The image displays two examples of musical notation for the song "Alone Together". Each example consists of two staves: a top staff labeled "Lead Sheet" and a bottom staff labeled "Transcription".

The top example covers measures 11, 12, and 13. The Lead Sheet shows a bass clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature (C). The transcription below it shows a similar bass clef and key signature, but with a common time signature (C) and a wavy line above the notes in measure 12, indicating a delay or syncopation. A greater-than sign (>) is placed above the notes in measure 12, and a wavy line is placed above the notes in measure 13.

The bottom example covers measures 22, 23, and 25. The Lead Sheet shows a bass clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature (C). The transcription below it shows a similar bass clef and key signature, but with a common time signature (C) and a wavy line above the notes in measure 22, indicating a delay or syncopation. A greater-than sign (>) is placed above the notes in measure 22, and a wavy line is placed above the notes in measure 23. A second ending bracket is shown above the notes in measure 25, with a "2." above it.

Fig. 14. "Alone Together." *Top*, mm. 11-12; *bottom*, mm. 22-23.

"Alone Together" lyrics by Howard Dietz; music by Arthur Schwartz.

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The second type of rhythmic alteration is either an anticipation or, more often, a delay of notes in order to achieve greater syncopation. Examples of anticipation of this type include "One for My Baby,"<sup>69</sup> and "Steppin' Out"<sup>70</sup> both times through mm. 30 and 33:

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> See Fig. 3. Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*.

<sup>70</sup> Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*.

Lead Sheet

31 32 33

I'm trim - [m]in' my sails With my top hat and my

Transcription

34 35 36

white tie and my tails!

Fig. 15. "Steppin' Out with My Baby," mm. 30-35.  
 "Steppin' Out with My Baby" from the Motion Picture *Irving Berlin's Easter Parade*.  
 Words and music by Irving Berlin.  
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In measure 30 of "Lament,"<sup>71</sup> Roberts slightly delayed every note in the measure, transforming a measure that contained almost no syncopation into one in which every note is syncopated:

Lead Sheet

30 31

Transcription

Fig. 16. "Lament," m. 30.  
 "Lament" by J. J. Johnson.  
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<sup>71</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*.

The final type of rhythmic alteration prevents the monotony of repetition. "Send In the Clowns" is a strong example of the rhythmic variety that Roberts may add. The notation contains many groups of three eighth notes per beat, with great uniformity. Roberts maintains the feel of these groups as consisting of three eighth notes only 14 out of 47 times.

### Phrasing

In an interpretive vocal fashion, Roberts' phrasing often imitates speech. For instance, he usually breathes approximately every measure or two and avoids very long phrases. Also, Roberts often does not hold long notes at the ends of phrases for the full notated value. He offered the following advice regarding phrasing:

I'll play pretty much what's there, but maybe, if you take your hand—if you listen to Frank [Sinatra] sing, and you emulate Frank, . . . If you listened to him—the way he phrased. That's the way I like to phrase—very natural. Once you do that, and you phrase that way on a song, you'll want to phrase like that on every song you play.<sup>72</sup>

He continued:

If there's a girl sitting in front of you, and you're playing a ballad, and you look down at her while you're playing, and she's got her eyes closed, you're probably playing the tune right.<sup>73</sup>

Roberts indicated that his phrasing of a song is based on its lyrics, which is fairly consistent with his recorded performances:

You have to know what you're singing. Read the lyrics! Read the lyrics; know how to say the words. If you don't know the song at all, and you don't know the lyrics, how do you know what you're talking about, to make it sound sensitive,

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<sup>72</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

and with feeling? If you don't know what it's saying, I don't know how the hell you can play it.<sup>74</sup>

There were some instances however, in which it is apparent that Roberts was not actually thinking of the words, but still gave the impression of a vocal interpretation. Specifically, the inflections and the accents would not work very well given the actual words, but Roberts was able to convey the spirit of the lyrics if not the literal words themselves. Examples include m. 10 of "One for My Baby" and mm. 24-27 of "Stardust":<sup>75</sup>

The image contains two musical examples. The top example is for "One for My Baby", measure 10. It shows a bass clef staff with a key signature of two flats and a common time signature. The melody is written in a lead sheet style with lyrics "got a lit - tle sto - ry" underneath. Below the lead sheet is a transcription of the same melody, with the instruction "End with tongue." written below the final note. The bottom example is for "Stardust", measures 24-27. It shows a bass clef staff with a key signature of two flats and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in a lead sheet style with lyrics "high up in the sky the lit - tle stars climb, al - ways re-mind-ing me that we're a - part." underneath. Below the lead sheet is a transcription of the same melody, with a "3" above the first measure of the transcription and a "3" above the first measure of the transcription in measure 26. The transcription includes wavy lines above the notes in measures 25 and 26, and a "3" above the first measure of the transcription in measure 26.

Fig. 17. *Top*, "One for My Baby," m. 10; *bottom*, "Stardust," mm. 24-27.

"Stardust" music by Hoagy Carmichael; words by Mitchell Parish,  
French Translation by Yvette Baruch.

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<sup>74</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*.

In other cases, it was apparent that Roberts was thinking of the actual lyrics. The clearest example was "Send In the Clowns."<sup>76</sup> In this tune, Roberts left out notes that were added by the arranger, even though they fit naturally with the melody:

The image displays four systems of musical notation for the song "Send In the Clowns". Each system consists of a "Lead Sheet" (top staff) and a "Transcription" (bottom staff). The music is in bass clef, 12/8 time, and B-flat major. The lyrics are: "[ One who keeps tear - ing a - round, One who can't move. ]", "[ Don't you love farce? My fault I fear. ]", "[ Who could for see I'd come to ]", and "[ Quick, send in the clowns. Don't both-er they're here. ]". The transcription includes performance markings such as "Strong." and "Molto ritardando.".

Fig. 18. "Send In the Clowns." *From top to bottom*,  
mm. 11-12, mm. 24-25, m. 33, mm. 46-47.

"Send In the Clowns" (From *A Little Night Music*) by Stephen Sondheim.

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<sup>76</sup> Roberts and Boone, *I'll Play for You Forever*. This version is an arrangement of the longer Barbra Streisand recording of the song from *The Broadway Album*, Columbia CK 85159, 1985. Compact disc.

In any of these examples, it is apparent that Roberts places a high priority upon the meaning of the lyrics.

## Articulation

### Accents

In a big band or jazz setting, performers are generally expected to play accented notes with a more percussive articulation than in other settings. Although much of Roberts' performing experience has been as part of jazz big bands, he did not practice this type of harsh articulation in any of the recordings examined. The closest example to percussive articulation in this set of recordings may be found in the F's below the staff in mm. 1-3 and 37-39 of "Part 4."<sup>77</sup> Even in these measures, however, the accent is primarily achieved through volume and tone. Except for natural metric and emphasized swing accents, Roberts rarely added obvious accents to notes in the recordings included in this study, and the accents he did add almost always fall on or below the B-flat on the second line of the bass clef staff. The lack of harshness in Roberts' accents is consistent with his generally light articulation.

### Ending Notes with the Tongue

In the lighthearted swing tunes "One for My Baby," "Steppin' Out," and "Walkin',"<sup>78</sup> Roberts sometimes employed another technique usually associated with

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<sup>77</sup> Riddle, *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone*.

<sup>78</sup> "Steppin' Out" from Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*; "Walkin'" from Nelson Riddle, "Nel Blu Di Pinto Di Blu" and "Walkin'," Capitol F 4024, 1958[?], 7-inch single.

jazz playing: ending notes with his tongue rather than with a gradual, ringing taper with his breath. Roberts used this harsher release in two circumstances: first, on short notes, in order to achieve the effect of “biting” them; and second, after certain long, scooped notes.<sup>79</sup>

### “Ghosting” or “Faking” Notes

Drawing further from jazz techniques, Roberts “ghosted” or “faked” some notes, projecting the impression of a light sound or facilitating some difficult passages. That is, he chose not to exhibit the same full tone quality on some notes, going so far in a few cases that notes may have consisted of only articulation, or they were not even audible, but implied. According to Roberts, “Dump some notes, and it’ll swing better. That’s an old jazz trick.” He also stated that the technique is “very important with bass trombone, for sure.”<sup>80</sup> Occurring on upbeats, examples of this technique can be heard in “Steppin’ Out,” “One for My Baby,” “Alone Together,” and “Send In the Clowns.”<sup>81</sup>

### Rubato Playing

When asked for advice about playing over slow, rubato accompaniments, Roberts stated:

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<sup>79</sup> For scooped notes ended with tongue, listen to “One for My Baby,” mm. 6, 10, 22, 26, 46, 50; “Steppin’ Out,” mm. 19, 21, 23, 75, 77, 79; “Walkin’,” mm. 6, 14, 30, 46. “One for My Baby” and “Steppin’ Out” from *Big Band Ballads*; “Walkin’” from “Nel Blu Di Pinto Di Blu” and “Walkin’,” Capitol F 4024, 1958[?], 7-inch single.

<sup>80</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>81</sup> “Steppin’ Out” and “One for My Baby” from Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*; “Alone Together” from Roberts and Boone, *I’ll Play for You Forever*.



It sounds *natural*. If it sounds rushed, something's wrong, or if it sounds like it's dragging, something's wrong. . . . Just play the right notes when you play them. Slower, faster—I don't want to go fast. I'll go slower, usually. . . .<sup>82</sup>

Although Roberts' statement lacks specificity, something can be gained by examining the recording with the most clearly rubato accompaniment, "Stardust."<sup>83</sup> In this recording, Roberts placed about half of the notes where indicated by the notation and half either earlier or later than indicated.<sup>84</sup>

### Importance of Fundamentals

Roberts presented several key thoughts in our discussions about playing the trombone well. He emphasized the importance of strong fundamental skills and placed a high priority on tone quality and passed on the advice of his first teacher, Jack Dalby: "The first thing we want to do is get the greatest sound in the world, and then learn what to do with it."<sup>85</sup> Never claiming to be a highly technical player, Roberts also stated:

. . . being a master of simplicity is really a great way to learn to play. Because if you think about it, being an absolute master of simplicity means you've already got ninety percent of the business. If you listen to television and listen to the movies, there isn't much that you hear the trombones doing that you can't play! It's the ten percent stark terror that you have to worry about.<sup>86</sup>

When asked if there was anything that we did not discuss in our interviews that he thought should be addressed, Roberts stressed long tones, slurs, and playing ballads:

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<sup>82</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.

<sup>83</sup> Roberts, *Big Band Ballads*.

<sup>84</sup> See Fig. 17.

<sup>85</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>86</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

I think, you know, long tones and slurs. Get the greatest sound in the world, and then learn what to do with it. . . . Play long tones and slurs. What are the best ways to play long tones and slurs? Real slow ballads. And they're fun to do, if you play them right. Play soft. Long tones and slurs. Play a lot of ballads. A lot of ballads. Build up your sound. You know. That's the way you do it, I think. . . .

. . . The ballads wind up being long tones and slurs! You know, that's what they are! And learning how to play those long tones and slurs, just beautifully—you know—soft, and very rich. Practice long tones and slurs—a lot of ballads.<sup>87</sup>

He concluded:

. . . if you get Sinatra albums, and if you put [head]phones on, and you really sit down and listen deeply to how Frank is singing, try to emulate what he's doing, and play that on your horn, that's the way to play.<sup>88</sup>

Sincerity is an important aspect of Roberts' playing, and he believes that a person's personality determines the way he or she plays.<sup>89</sup> Sinatra influences him in this regard:

I used to do those live concerts and sit right down below [Frank Sinatra], and he'd be standing right to my right . . . and I would watch his hands. And as he sang, his hands would actually shake. You could see his hands shake as he was saying something. A trombone player—a bass trombone player—should play the same way. Otherwise, it's cold and doesn't mean anything. You've *got* to have that *feeling* and *sensitivity*, and style. That's a *vocal interpretation*.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps the most important comment Roberts provided, and the one that sums up his playing as well as his personality was:

. . . eventually, you're going to have to play something beautiful for somebody. And if you can't, I think you've got serious problems. You've got to have, first of all, like a feeling of love for everybody. Hate loses. Negativity loses. That style always is a no-no. I can't remember when I heard a real—I can't use the word on your tape—but I can't remember when I've heard one of those type of people ever play anything *really beautiful*. They're too angry. That's not right. That isn't music.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 9 April 2006.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Elecia Hill, "George Roberts: Tribute to a Legend," *ITA Journal* 16, no. 1 (1988): 29.

<sup>90</sup> George Roberts, interview by Yeager, 17 March 2005.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSION

George Roberts has been largely responsible for calling attention to the bass trombone and expanding its role in commercial music. Believing the instrument's potential to be more than a last-chair trombone or a root-and-fifth instrument, he has proven that the bass trombone is capable of warm, vocal expression, exhibiting range of emotions from lighthearted joy to sorrow. Although other authors have documented Roberts' life, career, and what he has done for the instrument, there has been very little written about how Roberts has been able to do it; i.e., how he plays.

The purpose of this study was to examine Roberts' playing and produce a document that would aid performers in emulating his interpretive approach. Several questions about Roberts' playing were posed and then answered through the use of ten lead sheets, ten recordings Roberts made from similar lead sheets, and two interviews with the performer himself. The recordings were transcribed and compared to the lead sheets. One interview was conducted at the beginning of the process, and one at the end.

#### Nine Questions Answered

Below are the nine questions that were the focus of this study, followed by brief answers.

How does Roberts interpret and manipulate rhythms?

Roberts' manipulation of rhythm can be broken into three categories: a dramatic "drawing out" of notes and phrases in order to build tension, a slight shift of notes to create rhythmic variety, and an anticipation or delay notes in order to achieve greater syncopation.

When does Roberts add ornaments, and what are the usual characteristics of these ornaments?

Although Roberts' playing would not accurately be called improvisatory jazz, his vocally-influenced interpretations do incorporate several impromptu melodic devices. His manipulations of pitch include scoops and, to a lesser extent, bends, glissandi, and falls, and in the recordings that were part of this study, notes from the F-Major triad. Roberts sometimes changes or adds notes to provide variety, and one device Roberts uses in many tunes is the grace note from an octave below. This ornament always occurs at the beginning of a musical thought, always after a breath.

When, why, and how does Roberts simplify musical passages?

Roberts leaves notes out if he thinks that the music is "too busy." As seen in the examples, Roberts may choose to omit some ornamental notes that he feels are superfluous to the melody.

When and why does Roberts play music in an octave different from the one written?

Approaching the bass trombone as an instrument possessing the same vocal range as a male vocalist, Roberts avoids playing phrases very high or very low on the instrument. Roberts will sometimes lower notes by an octave if he believes they will be musically appropriate and better suited to the bass trombone's character. Sometimes, he will take advantage of the instrument's low register by playing the last note of a tune an octave lower.

What is Roberts' process to decide proper phrasing? Is there a process?

Roberts' method of determining phrasing is an informal, mostly unconscious one. Although he may take note of an aspect of a performance with which he was not satisfied, Roberts' thought process is mostly spontaneous. Whether or not Roberts plays notes and rhythms exactly the way they would be sung, he always conveys the spirit of a given tune.

How much does Roberts vary articulation in a solo performance?

Roberts' articulation is fairly consistently light, and he achieves accents through stronger tone, rather than through percussive use of his tongue. In the examined recordings, accents added by Roberts almost always occur on or below the B-flat on the second line on the bass clef staff. He will occasionally end notes with his tongue, either after scoops or on short notes. In order to keep his playing light, Roberts will sometimes ghost notes that land between beats.

What is Roberts' general dynamic range when performing a solo?

In the recordings that were included in this study, Roberts usually played in the soft- to middle-dynamic range, often between *piano* and *mezzo forte*. As indicated by his comments, Roberts is able to rely on a highly projecting sound as a substitute for volume.

How does Roberts manage rubato playing? How does he manage rubato playing when the background is pre-recorded?

Since concrete generalizations about Roberts' rubato playing are elusive, I asked him for his thoughts on the matter. Although his comments were vague out of necessity, Roberts indicated that he relies on intuition, and he stated that the pacing should sound natural—not rushed or dragging.

How much of a given performance does Roberts plan ahead of time, and how much is spontaneous?

Roberts' performances of a tune are fairly consistent, but he does not consciously plan those performances to a great extent. Instead, he may take note of aspects of a performance with which he is not satisfied, and then try something else. The overall approach is spontaneous.

## Final Thoughts

Roberts' own comments reveal several things concerning his thinking about playing the bass trombone. First, vocal models have greatly influenced his playing. Second, fundamental skills such as long tones and slurs are a high priority with Roberts, and he recommends practicing these skills through playing ballads. Finally, Roberts believes that a person's personality determines how he or she plays, and it is necessary for a ballad player to feel love for people and be generally positive.

The expressive qualities of Roberts' playing are so great that he was able to take an instrument that was considered a sad, lumbering one that played out of tune and draw generations of trombone players to it through his playing. Roberts' legacy is not only fundamental to the heritage of the bass trombone, but it is also an important part of the heritage of the trombone in general. No text may serve as an adequate substitute for listening, and this document is no different in that regard. Instead, it should be used in conjunction with listening, as a complementary tool to become more aware of Roberts' techniques. Perhaps, this text may also serve to promote an approach to playing the bass trombone that should never be lost.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW BETWEEN ROBERTS AND YEAGER, 17 MARCH 2005



JY: You ready to be grilled?

GR: Oh, yeah. Go ahead, go ahead.

JY: I could shine the light on you or . . .

GR: Oh, [a] star.

JY: What was the concept of the bass trombone when you decided to start playing—when you switched?

GR: Well, the concept of the horn that Bart Varsalona played, you know, with Kenton, was a loud, bombastic, strong player. And I liked the sound of the bass trombone, always. It's always been my thing. I'd never thought of doing anything different [from playing tenor trombone] until I got with Krupa's band and sitting next to Urbie Green and listening to Urbie play. I played tenor trombone on Krupa's band—this is way back in the forties and—late forties—and listening to Urbie, I realized that as a trombone player, I'm not that kind of a trombone player, like Urbie. I will *have* to be if I'm going to survive in the business. You know, this is over fifty years ago. And I'm going to have to do *something*. What can I . . . If I'm going to survive, I'm going to have to do something better than Urbie. Or I won't survive, because he'll get all the work. I mean that's the way it would be, or a better tenor trombone player will get the work, and I don't play that way—like that powerful, and that high and all that stuff, but I do have a better lower register and I thought, "Wait a minute! Bart Varsalona with Kenton . . ." like, "Urbie plays these gorgeous ballads and things with Krupa. . ." Like, "I wonder why you couldn't do bass trombone"—which I'd never heard done before—"Why can't you do bass trombone like Urbie an octave lower within reason and become a ballad player?" And because it's always been a root and fifth—you know, "Peanut Vendor," "Intermission Riff,"—this kind of a horn, always. And I thought, "I wonder if I would be smart to switch to bass trombone and try to turn it into a different kind of a horn."

JY: So, you said Urbie Green made a big impact on you . . .

GR: Oh, yes. He played so beautifully, you know, like, the style was wonderful and beautiful ballads and stuff up to high G's—well why couldn't it be bass trombone down to a low G? Just as effective as, you know, like playing ballads that way. And one night the thing that really got me really thinking about it was Gene [Krupa] asked me one night: he said, "George," he said. He said, "Play something." This was the piano [unintelligible]. You know, like the band was on a kind of like a break and the piano and the rhythm section is playing. And he said, "I've never heard you play, George. You should play something." So I looked at Norm Schnell, the piano player, and I said, "'Where or When.' I start on a low E-flat." So I started playing like, on a low E-flat on "Where or When"—a ballad. And that way, if you pick the right range and you don't play it down an octave and lock yourself into a like, a range that you can't manipulate

or have little innuendos—you've got to do it in the bass trombone vocal range, which is the male voice range, where you talk. That's the bass trombone ballad range, and that's like Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Nat Cole. They all [sing] in where they talk. That's where bass trombone plays songs. And I thought that would be great because then you can go like, "ba a ba dee da da dah." [Sings the beginning of a phrase with a grace note coming from an octave below.] If you were down an octave, you wouldn't be able to do that. You'd be locked in. You'd already locked into the low stuff. So I thought, "Where or When" in E-flat, I'd start on low E-flat and I started playing, and I [Sings another example of low grace note at the beginning of a phrase] You know like, you know how I play. And I started doing that, and I got through, and people used to stand in front of the bands and listen to the bands. They'd stand right up by the bandstand. And a biig round of applause when I got through playing . . . a *ballad*: "Where or When." And that made me feel good, and I went back, and I looked over at Gene [Krupa], who—he asked me to play him something—had a big smile on his face. He really liked that. And I sat down and Urbie looked at me and he said, "You know," he said, "You're the only guy I've ever heard play that like a *trombone*." And I said, "Well, Urbie, it *is* a trombone! It should be. . . It should sound like *you* an octave lower." You know, within reason, like, like pretty, soft, beautiful melodic sound. And what the applause meant was: I wonder if my thoughts about turning the horn into a melodic horn is what I should do—because nobody does that. That raises my percentages of doing things [getting hired as a trombone player]. You know. So I'll never forget Urbie saying that to me because—"You're the only one who makes it sound like a *trombone*." Well, it *is* a trombone. It's not a baritone or a tuba or something bigger than what it is. It's still a resonant, projecting instrument, like a tenor trombone.

And I thought [I should] turn bass trombone into a great vocal instrument [and] make it a real love horn. You know. And when I think about playing a ballad, I think of playing as softly and as velvety as I can. You know, I wouldn't want to be like the root and fifth kind of a player, where you start playing real loud just to prove that you're playing bass trombone. You've already lost then. You learn how to play a song in the vocal range, which is like where I'm talking right now. That's the bass trombone vocal range.

JY: So you say—you know—play very soft in that nice middle range. That's kind of what you've been doing for many years.

GR: That's right!

JY: What about that balance . . . How loud do you like to be with your background?

GR: A vocalist. . . If the band is playing so loud that you can't hear the vocalist, the band is wrong! Because you can't play a ballad loud or angry or that kind of a feeling. You can't do it that way. You've got to be soft, and if I'm soft. . . Like if the band overpowered Sinatra, he'd kill 'em, you know. And [if] you listen to Nelson [Riddle], Nelson never got in the way of a vocalist. The big instrumental things were always in

the holes—never while the singer was singing. And I started to think—well, that all came later when Nelson and I talked for years about things like that. But I think turning the horn into a beautiful ballad horn was the first thing that I thought. "I've got to accomplish that, because nobody does that," and "Bart is a tough, 'Peanut Vendor,' 'Intermission Riff' kind of a player. . ." [He was a] great player, but it's that big volume thing.

JY: It's a different style.

GR: Yeah, it is.

JY: Nobody was playing it like a nice, pretty instrument.

GR: That's right! And why wouldn't that work? And when I played "Where or When" and the people applauded, I thought, "My God! Am I right in my thinking about turning the horn into a ballad horn?" Because everybody likes that sound. And later when I went with [Stan] Kenton, Johnny Richards, who wrote for Kenton—I was telling him about my thoughts, and he picked up on it, and he wrote "Stella by Starlight," ["September Song?"] "Yesterdays," "Alone Together," and people just loved it. I played "Stella by Starlight," ["September Song?"] believe it or not, in Carnegie Hall! Bass trombone playing a beautiful melody in Carnegie Hall? Fine! You could do that with a symphony too, couldn't you? Yes, you could! And I started thinking, "This is the way I'm going to go." And Lee Gillette, who used to come out and record Kenton's band on the road with John Palladino—he liked my sound.

JY: Everybody seems to like your sound.

GR: Well. . . You know, like being a master of simplicity is really a great way to learn to play. Because if you think about it, being an absolute master of simplicity means you've already got ninety percent of the business. If you listen to television and listen to the movies, there isn't much that you hear the trombones doing that you can't play! It's the ten percent stark terror that you have to worry about. Every once in a while that happens. But being a master of simplicity, which goes back into being a sound player—and while we're talking about the sound thing, I think the reason that they bought me that way at the beginning was because of the simplicity and purity of the sound—not tough all the time. You can't go in back of a ballad and [think] "I'm gonna be louder than any of the other four guys. That'll show how good I am." It'll also show how stupid I am if I play that way. And I have to be a master of blending with everybody. That's that master of simplicity thing again.

JY: So, the sound is something that's very important. I know that's been—you've stressed that with me many times.

GR: That's what they buy—is the sound.

JY: And everybody that I can ever find any time that there's a reference to your sound, it's sort of a very complimentary—almost a wonder—a reverence that people have for your sound, the ease with which it is recorded. It sounds like it's very easy, like you're not working hard and it gets recorded very easily.

GR: You want to *play*. You don't want it to sound hard. You want it to sound easy and flow nice, and stuff like that. I think I told *you* once a long time ago when we first started playing tunes and things like that. Like, I said, "Play this for me," and you started off pretty tough, strong, because you can play those notes, and you played, and I said, "Why are you playing it that way?" And you didn't understand really what I meant at that time, and I said, "If you had a beautiful girl sitting across in a chair over there, and you were going to play her a song, would you go, "DA DA DA-DA DA DA!," loud? Hell no you wouldn't! You would play it softly, with as much feeling and sound and sensitivity as you can! That's why Sinatra is a marvel. Tony Bennett was a marvel, doing the same damn thing! If I want to be a popular bass trombone player, I think I'm going to be a *vocal*/bass trombone player. And nobody does it, and Nelson Riddle had the guts to expose the horn. You know, when I first talked to Nelson, I said that bass trombone is the greatest ballad horn in the world, and he said, "You must have the heart of an elephant!" And I laughed and we talked and talked. We talked for years and years about the bass trombone, and he exposed the horn. That's how the business came. If he hadn't exposed the horn—for other leaders to hear him using this horn, like, "What is that instrument?" Because nobody used bass trombone when I first came out here! Usually all the dates were four tenor—three or four tenors—no bass ever. Once in a while they [the tenor trombone players] would double and play a low C or something and forget it.

JY: Nobody had really thought much . . .

GR: No. No, they didn't think much anything about bass trombone. And Nelson and I talked and talked and talked, and he told me once: He said, "I have to have, George—my biggest thing is trying to find an identity for myself, because the only people that ever made it in the music business were the people that had self-identity to themselves. Like, Tommy Dorsey—you knew that it was Tommy Dorsey's band. Benny Goodman—you knew it was Benny Goodman's band. Charlie Barnet—you could pick out that that was Charlie Barnet's band. All the ones that had the self-identity. And he said, "I've got to get some self-identity going for myself if I'm going to be a famous writer." I said, "Well, you already have self-identity, Nelson." This is true, Jon. And he said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, I don't know anybody else—you haven't done it all the way, yet—but I don't know anybody else that writes for—*melodically*—for bass trombone, flute, Harmon-mute trumpet and strings. *Nobody* does that! And when they hear it being done, they say, 'Well, that's Nelson Riddle's.'" And he shut up like a clam. And he started thinking about that, and that is where his identity came from—by the use of bass trombone, flute, Harmon-mute trumpet: Sweets [Edison], Harry Klee,

myself, and strings. Nobody did that. Eight years later he did an album called *Joy of Living*. If he had done it when we first started talking about this, I think he'd have had a smash hit album. *The Joy of Living* was the first really exposed, beautiful, melodic bass trombone playing, you know, with strings and stuff. And I couldn't wait for the date to get over, and I went up to Nelson and I put my arms up on the podium, and I said, "You must have the heart of an elephant!" And he looked at me with a big smile, and he said, "You don't forget, do you?" And I said, "No, I don't. You should have done this eight years ago." And he had a smash hit performance album, which was *The Joy of Living*. It didn't sell a million, but it was the biggest-heard album. People listened to that more than anything he'd ever done before. And, boy, that really locked him into the bass trombone, Harmon-mute trumpet, flute and strings. And that's what he did, always. That's where his identity came from, was in that dialogue and our conversations and things.

Sinatra, to me, was the greatest trombone teacher in the world. I want to *play*. If a kid [sat] down with phones on, listened to Frank sing, and closed his eyes and emulate[d]—like, pretend like you have your horn in your hand—and as he's singing like, "Bah-duh dah-dah. . . bah-duh, dee-dah. . . bah dee-dah duh-duh-duh. . . bah-dee bah-dah" [first phrases of "Send In the Clowns"], just that way—not loud. How the hell could you play that loud? A lot of guys would, before. They don't now. But you be a singer, and I used to do those live concerts and sit right down below him [Sinatra], and he'd be standing right to my right. I'm down in the pit and he's standing up on the stage thing that goes around in a circle, circling around, or whatever they call that, and I would watch his hands. And as he sang, his hands would actually shake. You could see his hands shake as he was saying something. A trombone player—a bass trombone player—should play the same way. Otherwise, it's cold and doesn't mean anything. You've *got* to have that *feeling* and *sensitivity*, and style. That's a *vocal interpretation*.

JY: So, you think a lot of your playing comes from singers like Sinatra and Tony Bennett  
...

GR: Oh, and Sarah Vaughan, Ella [Fitzgerald], and Nat Cole is wonderful. Oh, yes. Absolutely. Some kid asked Bill Watrous the other day and said, "What do you think of George Roberts' playing?" He said, "What kind of a player do you think he is?" He [Watrous] says, "He's a vocalist!" That was Watrous' interpretation of me—"He's a vocalist!" Perfect. That's just what I want him to say. You know, and I think when people heard sound—you really have to have a sound to play pretty ballads, and I think the writers and people like that—I think before anything, they buy sound.

JY: What *is* a good sound? How would you describe a good sound?

GR: I remember when I first began. I listened to Tommy Dorsey—Mr. Commercial—with the fast vibrato, and he was a *fabulous* trombone player. Then I heard Jack Jenney, and I had to be careful who I talked to, some people said, because some people, you know, like a guy like Jack Jenney—I heard him live once. That's all I had to

hear him—was once. You stand in front of him and his sound just *floated* in the air. It wasn't like a pointed vibrato—a pointed sound. It was like velvet, and round and pure. "I've got to get that kind of a sound before I do anything," and I practiced. When I practiced, I would go into a room, and I'd point towards a wall and I'd close my eyes and try to play the prettiest notes, just notes—play beautiful notes, and just listen to them, and feel them resonate, and just for hours, and just play beautiful notes. And then put them together, and you've got a song.

You know, you're interpretation is who you listen to the most. What you really like you will retain. What you don't like, you won't retain it, you know. Trombone players that I always liked, great jazz players, Bill Harris, Kai Winding, Urbie [Green], Bill Watrous—all of these guys—just fabulous, but I never heard them once start on a low E-flat and go "Bah-dee bah-dee dah dum"—a pretty ballad, and that gives me an identity, Jon, and it did, thank God, create a business for us.

JY: I think it's really interesting: You're talking about Jack Jenney and that velvety kind of sound and I know that when I've heard *you*, you're able to make that beautiful, luscious, velvety kind of sound, but it has direction to it, it seems like. It's not just round and fluffy, it . . .

GR: I always understood that you get the most beautiful sound that you can, and then you put that sound in the back of the auditorium, not right around you, yourself. You try to project that sound to the back of the auditorium—not loud—and that means resonance and sound. The resonance is going to take you right to the back wall of that auditorium. Projection—like a singer.

JY: Do you think there's any conflict between those, between that velvety sound and the—Is it a balance, or are they totally unrelated, or if you have one, you'll have the other, pretty much? Or is it something that you just don't want to think about?

GR: Well, no. Velvety is just soft—being a master of simplicity, I think, is a good way to say things as far as a ballad player. Don't let anything sound like it's hard. Make it easy and soft, beautiful, round, project, resonance. All that—that's all vocal—that kind of interpretation, and that's always been my thought. And Lloyd Ulyate, bless his heart—he passed away, Jon—he used to get through a call—we would have a vicious, vicious date on some massive space killer-thon or whatever you call the thing, where everybody's blowing everything up and we're playing loud—well, like *King Kong*, like *bahm-bahm-bahm*, playing loud—I mean *loud*—and Lloyd would come back out and sit down and say, "Damn you, George!" He said, "I sit out here, and I blow my head off!" He said, "I'm working my tail off, right to the bone!" And he said, "I can't even see you or hear you sitting here in the section, and I went into the booth, and all I can hear is you!"

JY: That's not the first time you've gotten that comment, before.

GR: No, I know it isn't, and that's always been the way, and I think that's resonance and projection.

JY: That happened with Kenton, right?

GR: Yes. Well, Stan went up to Milt Bernhart when I first went on Kenton's band, and Stan said, "What do you think of George?" And Milt said, "Well, he doesn't play very loud," and he [Kenton] said, "Milt," he said, "Go on the other side of the auditorium, and listen to the band, and all I can hear is him [meaning Roberts]." That's projection and sound. You always look to the other side of the room—not directly in front of you—to the other side of the room. And you close your eyes and play beautiful notes, and project them out as far as you can, like a vocalist would do.

JY: So part of a vocal style is getting that projection.

GR: That's right. That's right. Yeah. Absolutely.

JY: Well, what do instrumentalists and singers do differently? Like, why are you drawn to the singers? What is it different about what they're doing?

GR: I understand the ballad thing, or the vocal thing. I was singing in church choir when I was a little kid, in Des Moines, Iowa, and used to think the vocal things—like our choir director would talk about singing and stuff like this, you know, and vocal things. And I was just starting to get into whole notes and stuff, you know, with my first teacher, and my first teacher was Jack Dalby, who was getting his credentials at Drake University. And Jack said, . . . "The first thing we want to do"—this is important, Jon—"The first thing we want to do is get the greatest sound in the world, and then learn what to do with it." Well, are you going to use that great sound playing out of a book, or, eventually, you're going to have to play something beautiful for somebody. And if you can't, I think you've got serious problems. You've got to have, first of all, like a feeling of love for everybody. Hate loses. Negativity loses. That style always is a no-no. I can't remember when I heard a real—I can't use the word on your tape—but I can't remember when I've heard one of those type of people ever play anything *really beautiful*. They're too angry. That's not right. That isn't music. That's making an identity to these trombone—like that vocal thing. My mother went up to—my *sister*, Mary—Vernon Grant, who had a little band [that] used to play the VFW [unintelligible] stuff like this when I was thirteen, fourteen, and our mother—This is my first contact with politics in the music business. My mother went up to Vern and said, "Do you think you could get little Georgie to play in your band?" And he said, "Well, if he can play some songs." And he said, "I'll write him out a songbook, and if he can learn to play those songs so that people would really understand them and like them," he said, "I'll have him play with my band.

JY: So, in a way, that's kind of where it started.

GR: Yes, it is. And I got my songbook, and I started to play, and when I started to play the songs, all of a sudden it drew my attention to Tommy Dorsey [and] all these [other] trombone players that are playing melodies on records and things. Then I started listening to players, and stuff like that, and like Dorsey was—He was like king of the commercial players. You know.

JY: Yeah.

GR: Jack Teagarden, I absolutely adored—the greatest Dixieland trombone player in the world. [I] met him once and sat down and talked with him, and he was just wonderful to me. He was just really super. Everybody's always been nice to me and helped me. I feel I need to do the same damn thing, today, like with young people, like with yourself, Jon, when we started. Boy, [when] you started playing songs, did you change, and you know that. And your mother—the first time she heard you play—What was our song?

JY: Was that, ah. . .

GR: Tony Bennett.

JY: It was a Tony Bennett. Was it "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," maybe?

GR: No, it was, "Bah dah dah dah dee dah" [Sings first phrase of "Shadow of Your Smile"]. I can't say the song, but your mother heard you play it. I said, "Play something that you know this one Sunday that you know I'm going to want you to do." And you got a big smile on your face, and you played this one Tony Bennett piece, and your mother. . .

JY: "Shadow of Your Smile."

GR: "The Shadow of Your Smile." And that's the first time you went, "Bah dah-dah, dah dee-dah" [first phrase of "Shadow"]. You had a phrasing thing going with it, and your mother—I was sitting there—she made me coffee every Sunday, and she whirled around and looked and I said, "It's him. He knows what I'm talking about now." And once that grabs a hold of you, there isn't any other way you can do that.

And I think from that minute on, you were just nothing but step up, up, up, up, up. Same thing with Matt Walker—that kid is a wonderful little guy. He didn't do anything until all of a sudden he started playing tunes. And maybe, you learn how to sing on your horn and stuff, you become part of the music business. You can't play out of a book all of your life. You've got to stand up some day and play something just gorgeous—not a lot of notes—just—you know what I'm saying.

JY: Yeah. What's the point of playing if you're not. . .



GR: That's right.

JY: I know this can be a difficult thing to talk about or to think about. I'm gong to see if I can narrow in on how to play a tune, and this is a tricky one, but I'd like to have your thoughts about just like, time. Do you play what's written? Do you play ahead of what's written? . . .

GR: You play it with your interpretation of that. The time is critical in the sense of being, you know, like—Oh, how do you say this?—like your phrasing. Let me say it right, now. You're not locked into an absolute . . . You see the melody, and it's just straight melody and sheet music. Well, you don't go, "Dah dah dah duh dah dah . . . Dah duh, dah duh" [First measures of "The Shadow of Your Smile" in a very rhythmically even manner, while tapping foot steadily to the beat]. No, you don't do that. You did it once that way, and I said, "Why are you playing it that way?" And you kind of didn't really know what I meant by that. And I said, "Supposing there was a beautiful girl sitting there, would you go, 'Dah dah dah dah dah. . . ' [again, even rhythm, while tapping foot] just play notes, or would you say the lyrics?" You read the lyrics and know the story of the song. And then, all of a sudden one day, you went, "Bah dah-dah. . . [pause] bah bah-dah. . ." [rubato] Saying something.

JY: So in a way, the way you play it is the way you would speak it, with that kind of rhythm, that kind of stress on notes.

GR: Yes, that's right.

JY: It's like saying a sentence.

GR: That's right. That's right. You *say* it. It's like, you listen to Sinatra. You kind of want to say it. You want to play it the way you sing it. I think that's the simplest way to—Tony Bennett's the same thing. He's magnificent that way—great bass trombone teacher. Sinatra, Nat Cole. Sarah Vaughan was absolutely wonderful. She would go out—I don't know if you ever heard her walk out on stage and do "Send In the Clowns," and there's a full symphony sitting there, but not a soul is playing. And she starts like [still to tune of "Shadow"], "Dah dah-dah. . . [long pause] dah dah-dum . . . bah-dum . . . bah buh-dum . . . [continues, gets softer, then pauses] "Yeeah bah-dah dah dah dah" [big glissando down, then proceeds more quickly]. And she did it—just the whole thing all by herself. And that place came to its feet when she got through, and that's an interpretation of something that you want to learn how to do.

JY: She took her time. . .

GR: Oh, she did just what she wanted to do. She said the lyrics like she *really meant* them, you know. Sarah was—I loved Sarah Vaughan. When I was up in Reno, I used to

go in at the break and she'd be laying down resting, and I'd say, "You want some popcorn?" [chuckles] She'd say, "Yes." So I'd go get her a bag of popcorn, and we'd sit and talk. There again, as a musician, I would love to be able to play trombone like Sarah. [I'd] like to play trombone like Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, Nat Cole, Ella [Fitzgerald]. Except Ella would end it with, "Doodloddoodlah. . ." [frantically]. No, I'm not into that, but the—I think Sinatra intimidated me so much with what he did for, it was almost forty-eight, forty-nine years. And you can't say that he didn't intimidate me in the way I play. *Absolutely*. And I haven't necessarily heard anybody else, no matter what the hell they play, that has the same interpretive feeling that he had.

JY: Mmm hmm.

GR: And Nelson once made a comment, "You know, if I write a great chart, a really good one," he said, "That chart will be good, as good as it is now, fifty years from now." If it's a good chart, and that's true—because you can play the same things that he wrote fifty years ago, and they're still swingin' like it's out of style—that's pretty far out. Then that means that there really aren't too damn many variations of the way that you can do things to make it really right. How do you sing? You sing softly, with a lot of soul. If you're playing a song and you look down in the audience, and there's a girl sitting there, down there in the audience, and she's listening to you play, and she closes her eyes while you're playing and just kind of nodding her head, like with her eyes closed, you have her in the palm of your hands, because of the way you're playing the song. If she just stands there and stares at you like [demonstrates blank stare], [you should think,] "What did I do wrong?" You know what I'm saying.

JY: So you have to have that feeling *in* you—you have to, in a sense . . .

GR: Yes!

JY: . . . feel the song . . .

GR: Yes, you do! You have to know what you're singing. Read the lyrics! Read the lyrics; know how to say the words. If you don't know the song at all, and you don't know the lyrics, how do you know what you're talking about, to make it sound sensitive, and with feeling? If you don't know what it's saying, I don't know how the hell you can play it. You know.

JY: I've always known you to talk about singers, you know—of course—because that's what you do.

GR: Yeah.

JY: Are there any instrumentalists that have this kind of—that you can think of, that just come to mind—that have that way of playing? Do you ever take from other

instrumentalists—trombone players or anybody else . . .

GR: Yes, I've heard—You remember Bill Harris, who was with Woodie Hermann? Bill Harris played a ballad, like, it would just like, wrap you right around a tree—so beautiful. Urbie Green—ballad—just wrap you around a tree—so gorgeous. You've heard him do this. A lot of trombone players play with such great feeling, like you say, "Boy, there's a singer." You know. You hear different players play. That's a hell of a nice thing to say, because that means you understand them. [With] some players, [you think to yourself,] "I really don't know what he's saying." You know.

JY: Sure.

GR: You need to know the lyrics, or you don't know how to say it, and say it better than the next guy. You know.

JY: Yeah, that makes sense. Okay. Well, we've covered a lot of ground here, so I'm going to get a little technical with you now. I know you don't like to get too technical.

GR: Well, there are times that you have to. I hate working hard. [Both laugh.] No, no [indicating that Roberts is joking].

JY: I'm just going to ask you a question, and I'm going to see where it takes us.

GR: Alright.

JY: How do you play vibrato?

GR: My vibrato is—I picked up, I think, from vocalists, again. If you play a low E-flat with a vibrato as fast as Tommy Dorsey played, it would sound *terrible*. You'd sound like a nervous wreck. "Dee dahm." [low-middle register descending perfect fifth, with fast vibrato] It would be *terrible*. Like, the lower it goes, the slower the vibrato. "Bee daahm." [descending major third with slow vibrato on second note] I kind of almost just, I think, shake my head a little bit, just so there's a slight motion to it. And that's the way Frank [Sinatra] did a lot of it. Like, "Send in the clowns" [singing, slightly nodding head with vibrato]—as a throwaway.

JY: So you do some head movement sometimes.

GR: It's almost like, "Yes," slowly. . . .

JY: Is that in one area of playing? I mean, do you do that in the high range?

GR: The high range, you kind of—depending on what the other part of the section is doing—you have to go with them. If they're using fast vibrato—I know I always thought

to myself, like, "Good Lord! I play all these sessions and never use any vibrato at all on the fundamentals," which is fine, because I'm down low. That doesn't call for a fast vibrato. If it does, you're going to stick out like a sore thumb, because you'd sound like a nervous wreck. [Sings with fast vibrato:] Bah-duhh. It would be awful. So I think that the higher you go into the tenor trombone range, the more you try to blend with what the other guys are doing. The lower you go, the more I think that flattens down. You know.

JY: Mmm hmm. But I know I've seen you use a lot of the hand—the wrist vibrato kind of thing.

GR: Yeah.

JY: So you're saying that's sort of a faster type of . . .

GR: Well, in a sense, like the [sings:] nodding of the head . . . bee-dah bah-dah [nods head with vibrato on last note of each phrase], and the motion of my hand is not very slow. It's almost like a nodding of the head. I never play fast, fast vibrato. The sound doesn't call for a fast, fast vibrato. It doesn't sound right in the area where the horn is written ninety percent of the time. And in the vocal range, where you're in middle-low range, fast vibrato just sounds awful. So that's where that nodding of the head or a little bit of motion with your wrist, a little bit, you know. Actually the wrist is kind of a combination of. . .

JY: It's a little bit of both.

GR: Yeah. Because your head's moving, and it's just a *feeling* that you have, and make it as *natural* as possible—nothing that sounds forced.

JY: I guess you can't really do that if you're playing up above the staff very well, can you?

GR: No, you'd get a little bit faster when you get up above, you know.

JY: But when you slow down you can kind of . . .

GR: The lower you go, the slower it seems it would be, because it's more natural that way. It's a fundamental.

JY: Okay. I'm getting very knit-picky here about these things, and I'm sure you'll yell at me later about this [chuckles], but usually, when you do vibrato, like, how are you moving the slide, like, in relation to the note? [Let's] say you're playing an A. Do you go about like equal above/equal [below]—Do you even know what you do?

GR: Actually, I don't know. Is the vibrato movement with the slide? I don't know; it's a thing going back and forth more than it is I'm taking my hand, and I'm kind of moving it just stationary, almost like my head vibrato, rather than a fast motion with the slide. I hardly ever do that. It seems out of character for the horn, where the sound is all the time.

JY: It seems like I remember, when you were first teaching me slide vibrato—to do it—I remember you trying to get me to loosen up my wrist.

GR: Yeah.

JY: You had me go almost like a full position, and just really get that. Do you think that you ever do that when you're playing a tune—a ballad? Do you really . . .

GR: Not that *big* a thing, but, "be daaaaah," [demonstrating] and the slide is actually not leaving the position where it is. It's just, I'm kind of moving the horn—almost like I'm moving my head.

JY: But it doesn't really matter as long as you get what you want coming out.

GR: Yes. Absolutely. If it sounds good, you're right. If it stinks, you're wrong. [chuckles] If you're honest enough, you have to—I think you know when you play something well or you don't. When you play a tune, you know damn well if you like what you did. Or, "I should do that again. I don't like what I just did." You know. You never play the same thing twice. Always variable. See, I didn't get mad at you! [chuckles]

JY: [In satirical imitation:] "Stop thinking about that! [Unintelligible]" [Both laugh.]

GR: Yeah!

JY: I want to ask you just a little bit about one of your little trademark things that people recognize: this octave—coming up from the pedal register.

GR: Okay, part of the reason that I do that in ballads—it's like, [sings]. A tenor trombone player doesn't do that. That's a bass trombone innuendo—an octave thing. That shows what horn you're playing. [Sings.] From pedal, [unintelligible]. If you were down an octave, you couldn't do that—which is where that vocal range—where you talk is critical as that bass trombone melody player. Because, if you lock yourself into an extreme low range, you haven't got any room to try to do like, "Bah-ah dah. . . ." [Sings beginning of phrase with a low-octave grace note.] How can you do that when you're on like a low F—how can you go on a pedal F and go, "Bah-da dee-dah dah-dah . . . ?" [chuckles] That's like, your face—you do contortions. I don't know if I'm saying that right or not. You've got to be in the right area, which is that voice—*talking* range.

JY: So, it's just sort of an ornament.

GR: Yes. Yes.

JY: Judging by what we've already talked about, I take it you don't want to use it [just] to prove that you're a bass trombone player—you don't ever want to . . .

GR: No, I'm not thinking of it *that way*, but as a player, I think I would go home, and I would practice slurring from B-flat pedal, A pedal, A-flat, G, and try to tie those notes into the staff notes, so that you are able to do that, like "bee dah baaah, bah-ah deedah-dah." Make an exercise out of it: B-flat, B-flat, B-flat. "Bah-dah deee dah-daah." That's why you say you've heard me do that.

JY: Well, I rememb . . .

GR: I did that a lot when I was a kid—octave slurs. Octave slurs. Tying from pedals into the staff notes to up above. Always, like tying all those—that was partly Jack Dalby doing a lot of that stuff to me.

JY: Really?

GR: Yeah.

JY: I just remember, I had a time down at the [San Diego] Bay Bones a few years back . . .

GR: Yeah.

JY: And I played something with [them], and I threw one of those things in, and somebody was talking to me about it later, and he said, "You know I was trying to remember—I knew you studied with somebody really famous, and I couldn't remember who it was, and then I heard you do *that*," [meaning the octave grace note] and said, "Oh, it was George Roberts." [both laugh] That's [a] very identifiable part of what you've done.

GR: There again, like if you—to prove that you're a bass trombone player, you're playing it down a fifth or octave to prove you're a bass trombone player, those notes are all gone, because you don't have any room to do that.

JY: When do you do that type of thing? I mean, is there any . . .

GR: No, it's part of like, I'll just say "Send In the Clowns" again: [sings].

JY: Just a little bit of . . .

GR: Just . . .

JY: Something new.

GR: [It's] just [to] kind of *push* a note, like [sings]. Slur, or flip a note, or something like that. That's kind of. . .

JY: [It's] just to change it up a little bit.

GR: Yeah. It's kind of fun to do, in a song. Not *loud*, just, "bah-uh dah dee-dah." It's like, [claps downbeat, then sings, starting on up-beat:] "bah-dah dee-dah. . . ."

JY: You said you got that idea for doing that mainly from Jack Dalby?

GR: No, not really. He gave me a lot of exercises and things like that when I was a kid. A lot, a *lot* of exercises that tied the low range to the middle range and stuff like this. A lot of octave things. He did a lot of this kind of. . . [sings one of the Remington studies that gradually stretches intervals] And you've heard that exercise. He just ran that down my throat. I'm glad he did, because, [sings grace note in context of a tune]—there you are. That's partly where some of that came from. [Sings Remington study again, then sings octave grace note to begin a phrase.] That's partly where that came from. It wasn't necessarily Jack Dalby *teaching* me to do that, but the slur exercises, the things he had me doing were really—He really worked me on the things I was just singing.

JY: What about bass players? It seems like you mentioned that you'd listen, sometimes, to bass players, and they would do a little [sings octave grace note] . . . that kind of thing, and you kind of grabbed onto that a little bit. Is that . . .

GR: [Sings bass line with octave grace notes.] Yeah. It's being a little slangy, rather than so straight. Yeah.

JY: We've talked about most of what I have to ask you as far as *how* you play. I don't know if you have any . . .

GR: I think I should say something about this—I think you know it yourself, because I've said it to you before, and other people—that bass trombone absolutely must have impeccable pitch. It's a fundamental horn. You're playing the fundamentals under the section. If the fundamentals are out of tune, nothing ever sounds any good. The bass trombone *has* to have impeccable pitch, and I think I've commented to you about it. If you start playing a tune and you know it real well, that tune—if you're going to play it real good—is going to work on your pitch like mad. If you're going to sing it good, you're going to be conscious of pitch when you play those notes. You can't go [sings

beginning of "Send In the Clowns" wobbling around the pitch.] It's [sings again, with better pitch]. You're right there. You've got to nail the pitch. Pitch is terribly important, equally as—maybe as important as almost anything you can say. Because first coming to LA, like they thought a bass trombone—way, way back, in the early days—was, "Bass trombone is out of tune. It's a lament horn, which means it's a sad horn, somber horn, all that kind of a thing. It's good for low pedal tones and a low C once in a while, but it doesn't play in tune very well." And I looked at Nelson [Riddle] and said, "That's what a lot of people have said, but I've heard some things that you've done like, [sings lighthearted bass line] down on the bottom of the staff, [sings more]." That's not lament. That's not sad. That's not out of tune. Wrong! It depends on who's playing it, or if you're playing a tune or what, you know.

JY: Sure.

GR: That's a big one.

JY: [Do] you think that's because a lot of players try to be very just, big, and heavy, and . . .

GR: . . . louder than anybody else. Then I'm more important than anybody else, because I'm really louder than they are. That shows two things. One of them is you're pretty stupid, because it's supposed to be a blend. Bass trombone has to be one of the greatest blending horns in the room. [If] you go into a session with four tenor trombone players, you learn to blend with each different guy that plays lead. You have to bend. You've got to bend with this horn. You've got to fit like a glove. That's a big one with bass trombone, not being like, self-heard—that's all you're supposed to hear. Wrong. You know.

JY: Sure. I just have a couple of questions. I'm very curious—kind of getting away from playing, exactly. Some pieces—some compositions that you've had something to do with. I'm wondering what you can tell me about some of these things. Like the Nelson Riddle—we've talked about him some, and he did that album with you, the *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone*.

GR: Oh, yeah, yeah. [The] Dick Noel one. He had a little record company, and he wanted Nelson to write something for him. So Nelson wrote *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone*, just as a fun thing to do, because Dick Noel wanted to record it, which he did. Nelson also wrote—I think it was the first symphony thing—Santa Monica Symphony. He did a thing called "Lament." Bah dah deee, bah dee, bah dah-bah daah. . . It was really a lament. That's true, traditional style writing with a symphony. It was a pretty thing. Very, very lamenty. Get back—I forgot what you were . . .

JY: Oh, those *Five Pieces*. I remember you telling me something about them—that you went in to record them, and you started playing, and you were trying to be very [strict],



because it was a brass quintet kind of thing.

GR: Yes. I know what you're saying. Because I remember being asked once before like, "How can [it] be a legitimate thing, and I'm going—it's like, "Dah-dah-dah daah dah-dah, bah-dah dah-dah . . . ?" [sings melody for Part 5, demonstrating swing feel]. Nelson said, "Do it the way you want to, George," meaning, "Don't be strict with the notes." Everybody there is being real straight. He said, "Do what you want to do." He used to say that to me on dates, like with Ella [Fitzgerald] or something, where it's like, [sings a short pattern, with a swing feel]. He'd say, "Do it the way you want to do it, George."

JY: So, "That's what I wrote, but . . ."

GR: If you feel it a way that would be better . . . All he wants to do is swing, get that effect out as best he can. So, "Do it the way you want to do it." He always gave me freedom like that.

JY: So it's just sort of a framework.

GR: Oh, yeah. You bet.

JY: Did he give everybody that kind of freedom?

GR: No. No, he didn't, but he trusted me enough to know that I'm not going to start a pattern then all of a sudden stand up and start playing a solo, you know. [Both laugh.] I'm going to play exactly what he wants, exactly what he wants, and if he's written something that is technically kind of weird, I'm going to try to manipulate that thing around, but I have to do this fast, because you can't take all day to do it. [I would think to myself,] "Maybe if I dump this note, like [sings swing line with interval leaps, with several notes 'ghosted'], it'll swing better, instead of [sings similar line with strict rhythm, demonstrating awkwardness]." Dump some notes, and it'll swing better. That's an old jazz trick. Start dumping a lot of notes.

JY: I'm very familiar with that one. [Laughs.]

GR: Yeah. You bet. Well, that's very important with bass trombone, for sure.

JY: Some of those fast charts. Okay. Now, I don't know what you can tell me about this one. I've heard rumors.

GR: Uh oh.

JY: The Alec Wilder Sonata for bass trombone.

GR: Yes. Yeah, I remember. He wrote a thing for me.

JY: So that was for you that he did write that.

GR: Yes, but I don't know—at the time, I wasn't really into that style of thing, and I remember Jim Clapp [sp?] and a bunch of others with Conn and stuff that wanted him to do something like that for me, which he did. I ran it over once, I think, but I never really played it. I wasn't that really hot to do that. I'm more into a different thing, and I really wanted to pay attention to that. So I didn't really push around too much with Alec Wilder's piece. It was wonderful that he would do that for me, I think—just fabulous, but a different kind of a player should play this. Not me.

JY: I remember that I had played that piece on a recital, and I didn't know anything about where it came from.

GR: Yeah.

JY: And I found out later that that was written for you, so I just wanted to learn a little bit more about that [and] see if you were involved with any part of that.

GR: Not on a personal thing [basis]. I just saw the notes for the first time. I ran it over once with a great piano player, and I wanted to alternate a lot of the tempos of the piece. And that wouldn't be right to do that, and [I said to myself], "I shouldn't play this." You know. That's the way I felt about it, anyway.

JY: There are two more [pieces] here that I'm looking at. These are a little bit different in style. You have a composition, "Feelin' Low." That was you and Joe Howard [that] wrote that, or? . . .

GR: No, I wrote that. [Softly whistles a different tune he wrote, called "Walkin'."] Just a tune down at the bottom of the staff area. Kind of a rhythmical. . .

JY: Is that the same one I'm thinking of?

GR: Or is that "Walkin'?"

JY: It sounds like "Walkin'." I haven't actually heard that one.

GR: "Walkin'" had Sweets [Edison] playing on it too. Nelson asked me—[Do] you remember "[Nel] Blu Dipinto di Blu," I think it was?

JY: Yeah. "Volare."

GR: "Volare." Yeah. That was going to be Nelson's big Capitol push record, one time.

And he was getting ready, and he called me up and said, "George," he said, "Write me a tune," and he said, "I'll put it on the back of this." And he said, "If this becomes a hit," he said, "and your piece will be on the other side of it," he said, "You'll pick up a lot of performance stuff, and I'll get you into ASCAP." So he and Sammy Cahn got me into ASCAP, believe it or not, and so I wrote that piece for the back of "[Di]pinto di Blu." And then Dean Martin heard the tune, and it's an Italian tune, and he really liked it. And Capitol dumped Nelson and did Dean Martin's . . . was released before Nelson got his out, and Dean's became the big one, not Nelson's.

JY: That was huge, right?

GR: Oh, yeah.

JY: That was not very good for your arranging . . .

GR: I thought, "Well, there goes my millions of dollars of residuals." [Chuckles.]

JY: I haven't heard a recording of that yet [of Roberts' arrangement]. I'm going to have to . . .

GR: I just heard one the other day. Someone sent it to me. I'd forgotten completely about it. Sweets [Edison] is on the thing, and he's—you know, Sweets was with Basie for years—trumpet player. Great, great jazz trumpet player, and he and I were just inseparable friends. I think you will like this. And this one day we're playing, and it might have been on "Walkin'" that I said, "Sweets, you've got to do me a favor and tell me, how did you develop that fantastic style that you have—You know, where you put a Harmon mute trumpet in, and all you do is go, 'Daaaaa . . . Aaaaa . . .?' [sings long notes with a falls, chuckling] where you've got the tempo that's like [clapping beat]—so fast, you can't keep up with the time, it's so fast. He said, "Well, George," he said, "How'd that happen?" He said, "I developed that style because I was with Basie, and he looked up at me once, and he had this tempo going so fast,"—and he said some dirty thing—and he said, "That was so fast," he said, "All I could do was grab my horn and play something—[Basie said,] 'Play something!'" And he [Edison] slammed a Harmon mute in his horn, and he went, "Daaaa . . . Yaaaa . . ." He said, "Everybody loved me doing that, so I've done it ever since!" [Both laugh.] That was Sweets Edison—one of the greatest trumpet players in the world. [He was] one of my favorite people, too. He was called Mr. Foul Mouth because every date that you'd go to, he'd have some of the sickest jokes you've ever heard in your life. And the band [was] always on the floor when Sweets was on the band—funny guy. He was a good friend of mine. I hated to see him go.

JY: We got to talking about the "Walkin'" thing. What about the "Feelin' Low?"

GR: "Feelin' Low" was another thing. That was with Frank DeVol. I think we were doing something—He said, "Just get one tune, [and] we'll put it on the album." That's for performance, if it's played a lot. So, I wrote a piece out, and it was "Feelin' Low."

JY: Did you do all the arranging . . . ?

GR: Oh, no. I wrote the melody thing out, like a thing for bass trombone, and then Nelson, er Frank DeVol did the writing, or putting the thing together.

JY: And was that similar to "Walkin'?" Was Nelson—Did he have any part . . .

GR: Nelson wrote. No, he wrote the thing out.

JY: He wrote the thing out, and . . .

GR: Yeah. I wrote the melody, and he put in things for Sweets . . . .

JY: Okay.

GR: It's always combinations, and stuff. You know.

JY: Sure.

JY: Let's see. I did skip over one thing. We're to the end, I think, but I forgot to ask you about this. I have a book that you did several years ago with Paul Tanner.

GR: Oh, yes, yes, yes—*Let's Play Bass Trombone*.

JY: Yeah.

GR: I wanted to do an ultra simple album with a lot of whole notes—stuff like that—and force the bass trombone players to play long tones, and stuff like that. Then, all of a sudden, with Paul, we started bringing in different stuff, and all of a sudden, like Frank Comstock's *Patterns* theme came in. "Bah ba-dahm, ba-dah-dah . . ." and so, "Okay, let's do the *Patterns* thing and do it down in half steps, and see how low you can do that." [Chuckling.] But that's where a lot of those things came from.

JY: Is there anything big that you'd change in that, looking back on it?

GR: No, not really. [Here, it seems that Roberts is probably thinking about another Paul Tanner book that Roberts had a part in: *Practice with the Experts*.] That was Paul Tanner's thing. A lot of identity for me came from that thing, because I was in it, you know. A lot of trombone players were in that. *Practice with the Experts* . . . Is that? . . .

JY: This is the, ah . . .

GR: Oh, [*Let's*] *Play Bass Trombone*. That's right. I was trying to do a very simple method to get the kids started on long tones, quarter notes, half notes, things like this, and develop a sound first, before you do anything. That's kind of what my thought was with that, and then it went off into exercises and stuff like that, that I just picked up some things that I had done when I was a kid, like, I stole out of a book Jack Dalby had given me a lot of. I think those da-da-da da-da-da. . . Those kind of things were Jack Dalby, and that's really great that he did that, because that wound up being part of my style later on, in years. And thank God I had done that, you know. And it fit like a glove when I switched from tenor to bass—just locked in. That's where a lot of the innuendos for bass trombone are, which is why I say your voice is the vocal range. That way, you've got the octave lower for the innuendos. If you're down an octave, you're locked in. You can't do any of that stuff.

JY: I'm glad you mentioned *Practice with the Experts*. You're saying that was the Frank Comstock? . . .

GR: Yeah. *Patterns*. Yeah. One that I know that you know—like Nelson did "I've Got You Under My Skin"—that's the biggest single record Sinatra ever had. It really is. It may be a surprise, but that is. And three months before he did the date with "I've Got You Under My Skin," he called up, and he said, "George." He said, "I need some advice on something." He said, "Frank wants a sixteen or so many bars crescendo in the middle of "I've Got You Under My Skin." And he said, "I'd like to use kind of like an Afro-Cuban rhythmical . . . trombone rhythmical thing." I said, "Oh, yeah. That would be great. Why don't you use the one that Stan [Kenton] did, like [sings Comstock pattern]?" Oh, wait a minute. [Both start singing bass trombone part from Stan Kenton's "23 Degrees North, 82 Degrees West,"] and then the others start coming in one at a time." And he said, "Give me three of those." So I gave him mine that started it, the second one, the third one, and he said, "I'll do the rest of them now." So actually he had called me before that date and set up the pattern thing for the Afro-Cuban rhythmical thing, which was fun to have him call me and ask me that.

JY: I read somewhere that that was the first—when you guys were recording that, it was a big hit with the band.

GR: Oh, it was a big hit with the band, and it was one of the first—It was a gigantic, important thing that happened for bass trombone, because nobody had ever written for bass trombone that way before, in town. And a lot of people heard that, and different people say, "Who the hell is doing that?" And they start calling you. That's where you get the business, but you have to be heard. And Nelson, bless his heart, he exposed me like all the time, like I have to tell you that a lot of the things he exposed me on—like, he always wrote vicious little last-bar things on a tune, like [sings examples]. If I made one mistake, you know, on one of those last bar things, I'm an ass. [Chuckles.]

Everybody hates me, then, because we have to do the whole thing over again. But he always stuck me in the last bar of the piece. So I really worked hard to never make a mistake on the last bar of Nelson Riddle stuff.

JY: Maybe he really didn't like you that much! [Both laugh.] He was setting you up!

GR: Oh, he was—maybe if he makes me so I make mistakes all day, he doesn't have to call me anymore. [Chuckles.] No, that's not—No, that was his way of exposing the horn rhythmically.

JY: So that was, in a way—your talks with him and your dealing with him—that was sort of what made your career happen.

GR: That's correct. That's very funny—Stan [Kenton] called me up once, after I had left the band and been out in LA and I started—I didn't go out to work [playing trombone] right away when I got out there. I worked [non-music jobs]. Stan called me and asked—he said [that] they were doing a big show with Dizzy [Gillespie], and Charlie Parker and June Christy, and a combination of a big show, and would I come out? So I went out for ten weeks, and I told Lee Gillette, who was a guy that introduced me originally to Nelson up at Capitol, that I was going to go back with Stan for ten weeks. I said, "I'm going to try to save up a thousand dollars. I need to do that." So Stan called me and said, "George, would you come out for the ten weeks?" And I said, "Well, I don't know, Stan." I had a job at a store that I was working at, and I said [that I was very busy], meaning I was kind of busy at the store, and didn't want to lose that job at the store. He said—he had offered me some money, and he said, "If I gave you *this* much, would you come?" And I said, "Yes, I would." [Both chuckle.] So I went back out for ten weeks. Just before I left, I got a call from Bobby Helfer, who was . . . He was Mr. Music Business in LA. He's the one that called you for Alfred Newman, all the major motion picture calls, the television [shows]. He was the big man. And one morning, about . . . oh, it was real early. I get a phone call—and this is the way Bobby Helfer talked—he says, [in a very businesslike, forceful tone:] "Mr. Roberts." I said, "Yes." He said, "This is Bobby Helfer. What are you doing right now?" And I said, "I'm having an unemployed cup of coffee." And he said, "How long would it take you to get to Radio Recorders Annex in Hollywood?" I said, "About forty minutes." He said, "Mr. Roberts, get your bag of mutes and everything, get your horn, put it in the car, and be here in forty minutes," and he slammed the phone down. And I—"Yipe!" So I leaped in my car, and I got to Radio Recorders Annex, and this was an enormous break for me. If I'd have known what I was going to walk into, I probably would never have been able to make it. And I opened the big, thick door going into the studio, and here is a big portion of the LA Philharmonic, Bob Craft on the podium, Igor Stravinsky is sitting in the booth, and they're recording. And I got—the bass trombone player had gotten up and walked out.

JY: I've actually read a couple of different accounts of that.

GR: Yeah.

JY: Did he just call in sick, or did he actually get up and walk out?

GR: No, he said, "There isn't a person in the world [who] can play this part, and I'm not going to sit here"—he evidently is having terrible troubles with it. It's a solo with a harp, and the harp is on the other side of the room, and he was evidently having terrible trouble with it, and he said, "I'm not going to sit here and be embarrassed," and he got up and walked out the door. How do you walk out on Helfer, Igor Stravinsky, and those kind of people? You don't do that. So I got there, and Helfer walked up to me the minute I walked in the door, and he says, "Mr. Roberts, that empty chair back there—get your horn out, sit down, and start playing." And I like [said to myself], "Good grief." So I went back. It's all happening too fast. So I got my horn out, and Bob Craft said, "George," he said, "You have a solo with the harp in bar so-and-so." He said, "Let's try that through once." And I looked at it, and it looked like a chicken had gone mad on the paper, you know." I thought, "Well, all I can do with this is count, and I don't care what Bob Craft is conducting. I'm going to count with my foot," which I did. He stopped half way through, the voice came out of the booth [and] said, "He's right; you're wrong," to the flute [harp] player, and said, "Let's make it. Do it with him [telling the harpist to play the rhythm the way Mr. Roberts was playing it]." So we did it, and the date was over. It was just that fast. . . .

Well, the interesting thing with that is that I went out—right after the date, I went home. On the way home, in the car, I started shaking, because I really wondered what the hell had just happened. Because Helfer wouldn't call me because I was a jazzier, and a jazzier can't play all the semi-legit picture calls and all that kind of stuff. "He's a jazzier." He just called me for Igor Stravinsky, and this kind of a thing, and in one sense, when you look at it, I just saved his can. And I went out on the road for ten weeks, I came back, and I worked from that time on. Helfer called me on almost everything. I was in the music business then. That legitimized me. It's a hell of a way to get legitimized. I had no idea what I was walking into. If I had, I don't know if I could have played it that way—knowing what I—you know, walking in and seeing Stravinsky there and what that is. Oh, that would have really been the end.

JY: Did you know who he was at the time?

GR: Well, you can't mistake who Igor Stravinsky is, especially when you know most of the LA Philharmonic and you see Igor Stravin[sky]. You know what he looks like. There's no mistake who that is. And Bob Craft on the podium? "Yeah, that's his conductor." And we did that, I got up, and I left. And halfway home, I just freaked, because that's something. I have never done anything like that in my life, but I got through it. Thank God I always practiced. If I hadn't, I would have been in trouble.

JY: It's being ready—is a big part of it.

GR: Yeah. It certainly is. And that was a thing of kind of legitimizing me. I got back from the road trip with Stan, and came back, and all of a sudden, the calls started coming in. Helfer, Elmer Bernstein, Mancini, Alfred Newman—that whole long line of people, and I did forty-eight, forty-nine years of motion pictures. And over forty-nine, fifty years—I think the last time I looked at the slip they sent me, it was, over that period of time, I think I did something like six thousand, seven [thousand?] motion pictures, television.

JY: Wow.

GR: Fast, you know.

JY: Yeah.

GR: You never see the music ahead of time. Walk in, play—which is what this thing with Stravinsky was. Walk in and play. That's why Helfer started using me. He couldn't say I'm a jazzer, and "He can't play the legit stuff." I just did, you know. But if I had known ahead of time, it could have changed my whole psych, you know.

JY: It would be selling more clothes?

GR: Yeah. I'd probably have gone back to Des Moines. That was a big one for me, and the "I've Got You Under My Skin" with Frank was a big one, because that totally exposed the horn on a big record, and that was for bass trombone players. And where we started off with maybe one or two bass trombone players in LA, we're a *thousand* now [laughs], and that came from some place.

JY: Well, I think everybody realizes that you were the primary force behind that.

GR: Well, I want to be the guy that did a lot of stuff for all the bass trombone players, because I love them all. There are great players. Dave Taylor—he's a monster, the bass trombone player out in New York. We were back doing an ITA or something, and I went in to see his workshop. And I'm sitting on the end of the aisle, and Dave saw me sitting on the aisle, and he came up, and he did his whole workshop standing in the aisle right next to me. He was doing his whole thing there. He looked down at me once, and he said, "George." He said, "I have a question." You could hear a pin drop. He said, "I've got a question I'd like to ask you. If somebody in LA—and they write a lot of stuff for you—and if you can't make it someday for something somebody has written especially for you, who are they going to call?" And I said [jokingly], "Are you kidding?" [Laughs.] The whole place went up in smoke. And I thought Dave Taylor went down on the ground. He was just screaming. Players like Dave Taylor and that type of a player is a magnificent machine—that's a physical machine. I'm glad I play songs. [Chuckles.]



JY: I was there, actually, at that . . .

GR: Oh, you were!

JY: And I remember him saying something very interesting, and I think it kind of speaks to what a big influence you were. He said that he consciously did not listen to you for a while. He avoided listening to you, because, I think he was saying that he was afraid that he would start playing like you, and he wouldn't have his own identity.

GR: Uh huh. Yeah, yeah.

JY: And so he consciously tried not to listen to you so he could do his own—develop his own thing.

GR: Well, yeah, yeah, yeah.

JY: I think that's a very interesting statement.

GR: Yeah, yeah. There are a lot of . . . "I don't want my bass trombone player to sound like George Roberts." Well, then, don't. . . Hire who you want, you know.

JY: I think it's like, well—I think his thinking was, "Well, if they're hiring Dave Taylor because he sounds like George Roberts, why didn't they just hire George Roberts?"

GR: [If they want someone who sounds like Dave Taylor,] why don't they call Dave Taylor?

JY: It's like Dave Taylor—what you're saying with Urbie—like, "Well, how can I be a better Urbie than Urbie?"

GR: That's correct—which I won't be. I know that about—if I'm honest with myself. I won't be.

JY: He knew that he wasn't going to be a better George Roberts than George Roberts. He wasn't going to be able to do that better, I think, is what he was saying.

GR: I love all of these guys—I really do. They all have their own thing to say, and I think it's fabulous—where it's come from, you know. There was a lot of work involved.

JY: Yeah. Well, I think I've asked everything that I was going to ask you. Is there anything else that you feel like . . .

GR: I think I'm going to throw in one last thing. Like, if I had walked in that day, and asked you to play something that you know I want to hear, when you were just a kid—

your mother was making my coffee—and you had played it wrong, I would have died. [Laughs.] But you did it right. [Claps, softly.] That started a whole thing with us, Jon, a long time ago. And give my love to Vern when you go back home, and give him a call and say, “Hi.” I’ve known Vern, and I knew Royce Lumpkin before, very well, and been down—who was the original North Texas State . . .

JY: Leon Brown? That was the trombone . . .

GR: No, the head of the big bands.

JY: That’s Breeden.

GR: Breeden. Leon Breeden. Leon and I were great friends. I was down there three or four times, and enjoyed the bands like mad, you know. And somebody said, “If Bill Watrous is playing something in front of you before they introduce you to go out and play,” and said, “After Watrous gets through, what are you going to go out and play?” And I said, “The slowest ballad I can find.” [Laughs.] That’s exactly what I would do, and Watrous knows it. And we still kid about that today.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW BETWEEN ROBERTS AND YEAGER, 9 APRIL 2006

JY: Good morning, Mr. George Roberts.

GR: Good morning, Jon.

JY: How are you doing?

GR: Yeah, go ahead and ask me all the questions you want, and I'll do the best I can.

JY: Alright. Okay. The first question I have for you is about how you phrase things, and what I want to know is, do you think consciously a lot about how you phrase things, or is it something that you just do and you don't even really think about very much?

GR: I really don't think about too much, Jon. I'll be playing a song, and I'll just phrase it the way I feel at the time. I don't think ahead about phrasing a tune or anything, at the time. I may not do it the same the second time. . . .

JY: So maybe, if you didn't like the way you played something one time, you might try it a different way the next time.

GR: Yeah. "I didn't like the way I did it the last time, so I'll change it," but I don't think too much about that. It just happens. It happens, you know.

JY: . . . You don't really plan too much ahead of time, but when you play it from time to time, do you mostly play tunes the same way, from time to time, or do they change much? Do you make a lot of changes?

GR: There are very, very subtle changes, I think, all the time. I think that happens all the time. You never play it the same twice. I don't think consciously about what I'm going to change and stuff. What happens happens. Like the phrasing part, if I felt like I didn't like what I did, I'll change it. I think about that, but not an awful lot, you know. I don't think ahead about things like that. What happens at the time is when I do it.

JY: So you're saying basically, it all is really very spontaneous. You're not thinking a lot ahead of time.

GR: No, no. I never do that.

JY: I wanted to talk to you for a second about your recording that you did with Rob Boone a few years back, called *I'll Play for You Forever*.

GR: Right.

JY: Was that the first time that you saw that music?

GR: Yes.

JY: Did you get a chance to play through it a couple of times before. . .

GR: We went over it a couple of times. Here again, it's just, I'm going to play it pretty much straight, what he wrote, maybe add or delete a couple notes. If it gets too busy, I'll delete some notes.

JY: Okay. Well then, kind of on that subject, I have a couple of clips for you. One of the things that you played on there [*I'll Play for You Forever*] was "Alone Together," and I gave you a couple of copies of music there.

GR: Yes.

JY: I'm going to play you that little bracketed section there.

GR: Okay.

JY: I wanted to ask you if you remember, by any chance, if you were actually improvising that, or if that was something that maybe you worked out ahead of time a little bit before you hit the record button?

GR: Well, here again is, . . . I never think ahead to record anything. It's what happens happens at the time. So, if I felt like, "I'll just play it this way this time, maybe."

JY: Okay. [Plays 1:30-2:00 of "Alone Together," corresponding to mm. 26-33.]

GR: Well, there just. . . . I saw a pattern back here like this [referring to m. 26], and I felt like I could stick that [there, at mm. 28-29] and come out right [at] your first circle here [sings, demonstrating similarity between written music and the phrase he added]. It seemed natural, because it's here [meaning the added phrase seemed natural because a similar one occurred earlier]. So I just moved this over here, and played this, and I didn't think ahead about doing it. Instead of having [sings mm. 32-33], I have [sings what he played, starting the phrase an octave lower].

JY: A little bit of low octave . . .

GR: Yeah. There again, thinking to the low notes, rather than higher notes. I'll always play underneath the things that I have, rather than higher.

JY: Okay.

GR: And I don't like to add a lot of fast things. I don't like to be too busy.

JY: I was listening to the *Meet Mr. Roberts* album.

GR: Right.

JY: And I remember listening to one of the tunes, and I was almost convinced that you just improvised a chorus, and so I was wondering if that was one of those times—I know a long time ago you said that maybe when you were younger, you had a little bit of experience with improvisation or something and I was wondering . . .

GR: I think everything in *Meet Mr. Roberts* was written, and that was Frank DeVol writing that, and then my interpretation on his interpretation. So that's where I think you felt there was some jazz there, like I would phrase what Frank DeVol would write, you know, and that would kind of come out like, it was just not like it is in the music. I'm going to *phrase* it. My jazz is like phrasing a tune. That's jazz to me. It's not like a straight melody. Phrase it differently, you know.

JY: So really, you're saying that it's not really too much different—like what you would have done on the *Meet Mr. Roberts* album isn't really too much different from what you're doing now.

GR: Yeah, right.

JY: It's the same type of thing.

GR: Yeah. Yeah.

JY: Okay. Well, what has been your experience, then, with improvisation?

GR: I've never gotten myself involved in jazz. I did when I was going through the music school at the beginning, and I played some jazz and stuff. And I went out on the road with bands, and I started reading, and I'd spent a whole, like, seventy-some years reading notes. That's what I've spent my life [doing]—never play[ing] jazz. I've been too involved in *reading*, like motion-pictures and television—stuff like that. I've spent a whole lifetime of reading music and phrasing, and trying to phrase the best way that I can, and that's where song comes in. Even like on a motion-picture call, I like to phrase my background lines that they would [write]. . . . I don't know. I wasn't an out-and-out jazz-with-a-chord-line-and-stuff [kind of player].

I did one thing once with Sinatra on "Makin' Whoopee." Nelson [Riddle] called up and said, "Do you want to play some jazz on "Makin' Whoopee?" And he said, "I'll send you the chords and stuff like that, and so you play in the background of Sinatra singing." So I thought, "Okay, the best way for me to play is to try to—like Nelson writes—he doesn't do anything to get in the way of the singer. So I'm going to play something in the back of Sinatra, I'm going to stay out of his way and play in the

holes." And I listened to what he was going to have me do, and I practiced at home kind of what I was going to do, and that's the first time I've ever done that.

And Chauncey Welch said he heard me play that thing—he was in New York and he heard the playback, and he said he flipped out of his mind, and he said he'd never heard a bass trombone player play jazz before. And that was a set-up, you know, and I had time to do it. Actually, [to] Sue, my wife, I said "Play the chords on the piano." She could do that, and she'd play the chords, and I'd try to figure a phrase that's in the holes where Frank wasn't singing. So I'm out of his way, and I thought of that like Nelson writes. He stays out of the way of a singer. That's what makes him so great.

JY: So you never got up with [Gene] Krupa's band, or something like that . . .

GR: No. Gene asked me to play one night. I got up and played "Where or When," and I played an *interpretive* arrangement. I started playing bass trombone on Krupa's band. And [I] played "Where or When" down an octave from what Urbie [Green] would be doing, and added like, [sings beginning of "Where or When" beginning with low grace note]—you know, stuff like that . . .

JY: So in a way, it sounds like you *were* really improvising. You were playing the tune because you just knew it kind of by ear, and practiced it, and you just added some things.

GR: Yeah. Yeah, very interpretive. I interpreted the song, you know. I always figured that to be just as much jazz as I really should get involved in, because, if you're going to play jazz, you've got to live with the jazz all the time. You can't just once every forty years stand up and play a jazz chorus. That would be so stagnant, it would be terrible. So I never did that. I stayed pretty close to home, you know.

JY: I have another clip for you, and this one is from that same album with Rob Boone. This is a little part of "Send In the Clowns." And on this, it's kind of the same thing—I guess [what] we were already talking about a little bit, but I'll just play this clip for you, and I noticed that you had left some notes out, especially in that last little phrase there.

GR: Well, each time I'm looking at the music here, where the circles are, what I deleted were things that I felt got too busy. It doesn't fit the tune. Rob liked to write in phrasing things, and some of the phrasing things that he wrote in there, I took out.

JY: Okay. Alright.

GR: And like the [sings mm. 24-25, approximately corresponding to 1:55-2:05 of excerpt of "Clowns," including written ornamentation], I just go [sings same excerpt without ornamentation].

JY: Okay.

GR: And down here, below, is like [sings m. 33 approximately corresponding to 2:40-2:45 of "Clowns" with written ornamentation, then sings without ornamentation, demonstrating how he played it during recording]. Without all the learning to play notes. I just left them out. I don't want to do those.

JY: Too much.

GR: Yeah, it's too much, too busy. When it gets too busy, I go the other way. . . . or too high, I go the other way.

JY: Okay, well that was my next question for you. Sometimes you don't play notes the octave that they're written.

GR: No.

JY: Sometimes you play high[er], [and] sometimes you play lower.

GR: Yeah.

JY: So what are some reasons you might do something like that?

GR: I don't know. Just the time. There again, like, I'll pick out what to do at the time that I'm playing. I might feel like, "Well, this would be nice up an octave," but not a real high, high "up an octave." If it's up too high, I probably won't play it. I like to stay at home base with bass trombone, in the staff, and probably really not get much above an F or a G in the staff [probably meaning in the octave just above the staff] with ballads and things like that. Stan Kenton liked to have me play high D's and stuff. That's, you know, like Maynard Ferguson. I don't want to be Maynard Ferguson. I'm going to play a low D, where I belong, you know. Like, "Yesterdays." You were talking about "Yesterdays" I did with Stan. I could get up to the D, but I had a hell of a time getting down off of it, Jon! [Both laugh.] It took twenty people to pull the mouthpiece off my face! I don't know. So I stayed away from stuff like, really high stuff. There are other people that play those high notes better than I do. Why do I want to play up there? I'll play what I'm supposed to, where I belong.

JY: It's more a tenor trombone type of thing.

GR: Yeah! "You play that! I'll play where I belong, down here—you can't do that." You know, that's kind of the way I felt about it.

JY: Sure. I also wanted to ask you about the Nelson Riddle *Five Pieces for Bass Trombone*.



GR: Oh, yeah. Well, it was going to be a legitimate five pieces, but we got it, and Nelson looked at me—because I played it very straight when we first started playing it—and he said, “George,” he said, “Do what you want. Don’t play it straight like that. Just do what you want to do.” So I figured instead of being [sings series of rhythmically even eighth notes], I might go [sings again with a scoop]. That would be a jazz inflection of something, rather than straight, like [sings again without scoop]. I’d go [sings swung eighth notes with a scoop], rather than playing the straight notes, like he had there. So I put in little slurs and things. And somebody asked me once, “Why [did] you do that? Everybody else is playing straight,” and I said, “Nelson asked me to do what I wanted to do on it, so I did!” And I thought, “Okay, fine. I’ll do that then.” There were times I wished I had played it straight, because then it would have been more of a legitimate album like I thought they said they were going to do, but I like what I did, and I thought it was neat that when I did it, I’m a little different than the other guy doing it. So okay, fine.

JY: Well, it turned out very well.

GR: But he said, “Why did you do it that way?” [I replied,] “Nelson asked me to play it the way I want to, so I just stuck in some slurs and—more of a jazz inflection.”

JY: And you can definitely hear the similarity in the style between what you did in those five pieces and what you do with the other types of ballads and things that you do.

GR: Yeah. Yeah.

JY: But, one of the big things that I noticed that was different was that you didn’t play too much with the time on those five pieces. Like normally in ballads, I’ll hear you maybe wait a couple of beats before you start the phrase or something like that.

GR: I felt very locked in with the parts, so it took some thinking at the time that I’m playing to kind of phrase it differently than just the straight way, without getting too far away. I don’t think I should get far away when everybody else is straight.

JY: Is that because of the nature of the pieces and the style, a little bit?

GR: Yes. Yes. Yes. Absolutely. . . .

JY: Kind of moving on a little bit, do you have any advice—this is a big question for you, and so you can take this in whatever direction you think you should—but I was going to ask you if you had any advice for playing over the slow, rubato backgrounds that I’ve seen you do a lot when you’re out playing solos on Sundays and things like that.

GR: Yeah. Well, I like to think of playing a ballad like—close your eyes, and feel like you really like the way it sounds. It sounds *natural*. If it sounds rushed, something's wrong, or if it sounds like it's dragging, something's wrong. Just natural things that—like, looking at "Send In the Clowns" or "Alone Together," the fast-moving parts I left out, you know. Rob put in some moving lines. Well, I took them out, period. Just leave it alone. It's better without anything being there. Just play the right notes when you play them. Slower, faster—I don't want to go fast. I'll go slower, usually. I think of closing my eyes, and I used to go in—I think I told you a long time ago—go into a room, and practice, and play beautiful notes. Close your eyes, and play a beautiful note. Just make it just beautiful. Soft, beautiful note. Resonant, projecting to the other side of the room. That's kind of the same thing that you just asked me, like playing a song. Like, close your eyes and feel like it just sounds *natural*. If you feel like you're rushing something, you're wrong, or you're dragging. . . .

JY: It goes back to that whole thing: not planning it out too much.

GR: No. Ah-ah. I'll play pretty much what's there, but maybe, if you take your hand—if you listen to Frank [Sinatra] sing, and you emulate Frank, and you hold your hands like you have your slide, like, [sings beginning of "Send In the Clowns," demonstrating slide vibrato], you actually can feel the notes move your slide! If you listened to him—the way he phrased. That's the way I like to phrase—very natural. Once you do that, and you phrase that way on a song, you'll want to phrase like that on every song you play. And I think you know that, too. You're looking for a nice, super way of playing it that's natural, you know.

JY: Sure. It's one of those things that can be difficult to put in words, sometimes.

GR: Yeah. I think so. If you know you're right when you're doing it, you probably are. If you feel funny about it, I'd question myself. If there's a girl sitting in front of you, and you're playing a ballad, and you look down at her while you're playing, and she's got her eyes closed, you're probably playing the tune right [laughs]. You know. If her eyes are wide open, staring straight ahead, like "How boring," you can predict that yourself, you know.

JY: I really have only one more question that I have prepared for you. I've heard you say from time to time that a person sometimes should play a tune so softly that the audience has to almost lean forward a little bit and strain to hear just a little.

GR: Yeah. I love to do that. That's a singer's way of doing it. If you can't hear the singer, the band's playing too loud. So I figure, when I'm playing a melody with a band, the band's going to have to play soft enough that I can play, because I don't want to be a microphone player. It isn't natural that way. I want to play soft, just like a breath. I know on "Send In the Clowns,"—ah, the whole piece isn't here—but the last note on "Send In the Clowns" that I play, is an E-flat pedal tone—on "Send In the Clowns," with

the key: E-flat. And when you play that E-flat pedal tone at the end, what it is is like a [sings last few notes, then exhales]. It's like a breath, and that pedal tone had better be really soft and pure and straight ahead. [Jokingly acts as if he's playing a loud pedal tone.] If you play it loud, you've destroyed the whole tune. And that's like Frank [Sinatra] just [exhales] breathing on the end of a song. And you can play an E-flat pedal tone just softer than anything, and it's—it works every time I've ever done it on a tune. Like, play an F pedal tone or something like that on the end of a tune. I remember Nelson [Riddle]—a couple of tunes that he did, I played octaves lower, but you've *got* to play them soft. Even the pedal tone has to be vocal. No other instrument does that—what bass trombone can do, if you play it like a bass trombone. . . .

JY: Well, those are all the questions that I have for you. . . .

GR: [Jokingly acts as if leaving immediately] Oh, see you later, Jon! [Both laugh.]

JY: I don't know if you had anything that you thought that maybe I should have talked about or anything like that, or . . .

GR: I think, you know, long tones and slurs. Get the greatest sound in the world, and then learn what to do with it. . . . Play long tones and slurs. What are the best ways to play long tones and slurs? Real slow ballads. And they're fun to do, if you play them right. Play soft. Long tones and slurs. Play a lot of ballads. A lot of ballads. Build up your sound. You know. That's the way you do it, I think.

JY: That's what it comes down to.

GR: Sure, it is. The ballads wind up being long tones and slurs! You know, that's what they are! And learning how to play those long tones and slurs, just beautifully—you know—soft, and very rich. Practice long tones and slurs—a lot of ballads.

JY: Sounds like some very solid, sound advice!

GR: Well, if you get Sinatra albums, and if you put [head]phones on, and you really sit down and listen deeply to how Frank is singing, try to emulate what he's doing, and play that on your horn, that's the way to play.

JY: Thank you very much for your time.

GR: Yeah, Buddy.

JY: And I appreciate you taking time and answering some of these questions for me.

GR: Super. Yeah, Buddy.

APPENDIX C

ELECTRONIC CORRESPONDENCE FROM DOUGLAS YEO TO YEAGER,  
30 SEPTEMBER 2006

There is no denying that George Roberts has had a great impact on symphonic bass trombone players. I can use my own example: I first learned of George Roberts when I was a high school student. I was captivated by two particular aspects of his playing: his beautiful sound and his sense of phrasing. No other trombonist—bass or tenor—seemed to approach the beauty of tone and nuanced style that he had.

As I embarked on training for an orchestral career, George became a role model for me. After I met him (at the ITF in 1982) he became even more so. We enjoyed many hours of conversation and correspondence. He told me how his sense of phrasing came from hearing the best vocalists of his day including Frank Sinatra. He always enjoyed my playing of hymn tune and gospel song arrangements in church—my style in doing so, which I recorded on my CD "Cornerstone," came directly from my knowledge of George's own style.

Part of my job as bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony is to play in the Boston Pops Orchestra. George's influence is felt every time I sit down to play with the Pops. While many of my colleagues struggle with the popular styles, the imprint of George's style—not just on his famous solo albums but as a sideman in countless other recordings—is all over my playing.

When I was in college I studied with Edward Kleinhammer (bass trombonist of the Chicago Symphony, 1940-1985). He told me that George was a real "hero" to him. Seeing the two of them finally meet in person at the ITF in 2004 was a precious thing. These two octogenarians found each other on stage after a class Mr. Kleinhammer had given and, after the moment of recognition, embraced in a warm hug. East meets West, classical meets popular, two men who have exerted the most influence over the bass trombone in our time finally joining together to talk about how the other meant so much to them.

Hardly a day goes by when I don't listen to George play something. We continue to stay in touch and his gentle [manner] is as much a model as his fine playing. Would that more players—in any style—would emulate the player and man that is George Roberts.

Douglas Yeo  
Bass Trombonist, Boston Symphony Orchestra  
Music Director, The New England Brass Band

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