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## MARCUS BELGRAVE ON TEACHING AND PLAYING BY HONORING THE PAST

BY THOMAS ERDMANN

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# MARCUS BELGRAVE ON TEACHING AND PLAYING BY HONORING THE PAST

BY THOMAS ERDMANN

**F**or trumpeter, composer and famed educator Marcus Belgrave, it's never been enough just to play; he also had to teach. In 1984 when times were tough, he was so dedicated to helping young musicians develop their abilities that even though teaching didn't pay a living wage, he couldn't give it up. It's hard to imagine, now, that times could ever have been tough for this master of the trumpet and icon of the jazz art. Winner of the Arts Midwest's Jazz Master Award, the Michigan Governor's Arts Award, the Benny Golson Jazz Master Award, and the Louis Armstrong Award, Belgrave has been on top and down low, but through it all was a love of the music and deep concern with passing on his tremendous wealth of knowledge to successive generations of young people. Just a few of today's young monsters who credit Belgrave for being their mentor include saxophonists James Carter and Kenny Garrett, violinist Regina Carter, pianist Geri Allen and bassists Robert Hurst and Rodney Whitaker.

Born in Chester, Pennsylvania, on June 12, 1936, Belgrave began playing the trumpet at the age of six and was playing professionally by age twelve. At the age of nineteen, he joined Ray Charles's band and stayed on the road with the saxophonist, pianist, and singer off and on for five years. Belgrave's first national exposure came in a big way, as the acclaimed trumpet soloist on Charles's version of *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. The trumpeter's high stature and eminent peer recognition soon brought him gigs with icons like Max Roach, Charles Mingus, and Eric Dolphy.

In 1963, Belgrave left New York for a location less crazy and settled in Detroit, working in Barry Gordy's Motown studios as a member of the famous Funk Brothers studio band for the next twenty years; it's his trumpet you hear on a slew of hit recordings including *My Girl* and *The Way You Do The Things You Do*. The number of famous artists his trumpet helped advance during that time included Martha Reeves and Marvin Gaye, as just two examples from among

many. Detroit's music scene declined in the early 1980s, but one can point to Belgrave's never-say-die attitude as being responsible for seeing the city's musical community gush forth with a new generation of master musicians, all raised under the tutelage of the master teacher-trumpeter.

In 1986, he accepted a position as a Charter Member of Wynton Marsalis's Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, and stayed with the group for eight years, appearing as soloist with them on numerous occasions during that time. Belgrave's strong pedagogical bent led him to being the founder of the Detroit Jazz Development Workshop and co-founder of the Jazz Studies Program at the Detroit Metro Arts Complex. He was an original faculty member of the Oakland University Jazz Studies Program, was the first Chair of Jazz Education and Programming with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, was Director of the Detroit Civic Jazz Orchestra, and continues to serve as professor of jazz trumpet at the Oberlin Conservatory.

Because he feels that, "you have to go to the past for the future," Belgrave is a highly accomplished and skilled master of Dixieland, swing, bebop, post-bop, R&B, and avant-garde styles. These abilities have led him, in his long life, to working with artists, in addition to those listed above, as diverse as vocalists Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, and Aretha Franklin, pianist McCoy Tyner, vibraphonist/percussionist Lionel Hampton, guitarist B.B. King, and saxophonists David Murray and Donald Walden. His work with old-guard masters like saxophonist Franz Jackson and pianists Art Hodes and Tommy Flanagan has also garnered him wide critical acclaim. Today he leads his Tribute to Louis Armstrong octet, performs on orchestral pops concerts, and continues to perform at jazz festivals throughout the world. One thing has to change; we can't allow Belgrave to be, as critic Richard Scheinin wrote, "a secret master of the music," because Belgrave's never been a secret to us.

**Erdmann:** *You're father was very important in helping you get your start in playing music.*

**Belgrave:** My father actually taught me how to play the bugle when I was three and four years old. He had learned music in Panama and was a bugler in the First World War.

**Erdmann:** *You've credited saxophonist, and your cousin, Cecil Payne as being the biggest influence on you. Can you explain how he helped develop your love of music?*

**Belgrave:** Now Cecil, who at that time was playing with the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band, sat me down in front of the Victrola, when I was at the age of four and five, and made me listen to guys like Miles and Dizzy. Since Cecil played with Dizzy, that was really my first influence; you can't get it any better than that.

**Erdmann:** *No, you can't. You started to play the trumpet at the age of six. Was your father your first teacher?*

**Belgrave:** Yes, my father was my first teacher and he taught me for five years before he turned me over to Don Ramus, who was a great influence on me. Don put me into several bands that he conducted. Don was also one of the teachers of Michael Mossman (trumpet teacher at the Aaron Copland School of Music). Don was also very influential in getting me to listen to singers. He had me listen to Mario Lanza when I was growing up.

**Erdmann:** *Those first professional gigs came when you were just twelve years old. What kinds of gigs were they?*

**Belgrave:** The first group was an Italian community band that played mostly concert band music. The second was a group of doctors who just got together on a weekly basis to play German ensemble music. Playing with guys who were so much older than I was a great experience because they loved music so much. I think my father might have been mostly



Marcus Belgrave

responsible for that gig because he played baritone horn. The third was a group of young people Don was mentoring, and that group was like a concert band.

**Erdmann:** *Can you tell the readers about your relationship with the late great Clifford Brown?*

**Belgrave:** I was in a band that Clifford would come visit and play in quite often, because he lived close to this band, which rehearsed in Wilmington, Delaware. It was what I would call a circus band because the conductor had just left one of the major circuses. The band consisted of three trumpets, three clarinets—one of whom was my brother Milton—two euphoniums, a trombone, a tuba, a bass drummer, a snare drummer and a cymbal player. We mainly played marches and circus music. Clifford and I had a very beautiful relationship. He was at least five years my senior and saw that I was very interested in jazz. At that time I didn't really know who he was, until I heard him on the radio one day with Red Rodney and Fats Navarro playing in Philadelphia. I didn't know how astute he was in music until I heard that radio show. I told my father, "You know that guy who sits next to me in the band? He's a great jazz trumpeter." In that little band we played a lot of transcription jobs that were run through the union. We'd play at old folks homes, blind folks homes, community concerts, etc. One day we were playing *Some of These Days*. I had the melody on this tune, and Clifford put his mute in and started improvising a solo while I was playing the melody. I couldn't keep playing. I had to stop and listen to him. That was my introduction to improvisation.

**Erdmann:** *How did you come to join Ray Charles's band?*

**Belgrave:** I joined the Air Force after I graduated high school, at the age of 17, but I only stayed in the service for two years. When I was just about ready to get out I learned he and his band were coming to town. So after I was out I waited in town a month for him to arrive. I had been listening to them since when I was in high school and loved that band a lot. The first time I heard that band he was playing Louis Jordan type of music. I knew I wanted to play with them so I waited for them to arrive. I got a chance to sit in with them due to the fact that one of his trumpet players had to leave the tour because his father had gotten sick. They were on one of those thirty-day tours with several other artists. This was in November. I didn't get on with the band at that time. I went back home to Chester, Pennsylvania and the band eventually came there in January, staying in town for three weeks. When they arrived one of their trumpet players told me he thought he was going to be leaving the band and if I wanted the gig I should sit in again. I did, but I wasn't paying too much attention to the situation. On their last night in town I went to see Max Roach, Kenny Dorham, and Sonny Rollins in Philadelphia at Peps Showbar. When I came back to Chester I just happened to be driving by the club where Ray was playing, and I saw people coming out. I didn't think they were still open, but I went up to the door to check it out anyway. The lady at the door said, "Oh man, they've been looking for you all night." She told me to go back and talk to Ray. So I did, and he asked me if I could get ready to go on tour with the band in an hour. I ran home, and of course my mother didn't want me to go, but my father said, "Let him go!" So I joined the band on February 11th.

**Erdmann:** *What was it like to be on the road at such a young age?*

**Belgrave:** I will tell you it was rough, especially those one-nighters. We would drive an average of 500 miles a day. The first night we went from Chester, Pennsylvania, to Buffalo, New York, and got snowed out. We were two hours late getting to the gig. That was my introduction to the road. It was a lot of fun, but it was rough.

**Erdmann:** *I read where you said one of the things you learned from Ray was that you want your music to touch all kinds of people. Can you elaborate on that?*

**Belgrave:** I learned that music transforms people. It doesn't matter what language you speak, music is such a universal language that it reaches people in exactly the same way, no matter the country or where you are. That was amazing to me... even in this country. The feeling that Ray emoted to people was so dynamic. He reached and touched people in the same way no matter what city we were in. Back then he didn't go to Europe. He had been once by himself, but not with the band. I left the band several times during the five-plus years I played with him. I went into the band in 1958, stayed a year and a half, and left in 1959. At that point

I went and stayed in New York. Then when I went back with Ray, the first place we played was France; it was the band's first trip to Europe. It was during the Algerian crisis. It was really strange to be there at that time, but the music had such a healing effect that even though we were in a war zone the music changed the people. I learned then how powerful music was. While the voice is a powerful thing, music itself transforms people. Music truly tames the savage beast. When you get a chance to actually see it happen it's wonderful.

**Erdmann:** *You would come and go and come and go with the band, but why did you decide to leave the band for good?*

**Belgrave:** My main reason for leaving the band was for medical reasons. When I was young I had prostate troubles. Doctors would say, "This is really strange for a young man to have these problems." I think it was from those hard seats we would ride on in the bus.

**Erdmann:** *You've worked with a number of other artists, and while I'll never be able to cover them all, I was wondering if you could talk a little about what it was like to work with them. The first is Charles Mingus.*

**Belgrave:** What a blessing. I used to go sit and listen to him play with Eric Dolphy, Yusef Lateef, Ted Curson, and Danny Richmond. Mingus didn't have a piano player at that time. I would sit and listen to them every night when I first arrived in New York in 1959. I really wanted to play that gig. Eventually I got to play and record with them. I loved playing the suite, *Half-Mast Inhibition*. Mingus wrote that when he thought he was going to die. Gunther Schuller directed it. That band was amazing. He had put together a big band including trumpeters Hobert Dotson, Richard Williams, Clark Terry, myself, and Ted. He had five trombones, and while I can't remember all their names I do remember Slide Hampton being there.

**Erdmann:** *Where were the written charts for that session or did Mingus sing the parts to everyone for them to pick it up that way?*

**Belgrave:** No, it was all written.

**Erdmann:** *Eric Dolphy.*

**Belgrave:** Wow. Eric and I were going to form a group right before I left to go back on the road with Ray. The next thing I know Woody Shaw was playing with Eric. I guess I left my spot for him.

**Erdmann:** *Max Roach.*

**Belgrave:** Great musician. He was the one who told me to go to New York. He kept telling me, "Go to New York!" He and Cecil were good friends because they kind of grew up together.

**Erdmann:** *When you did first move to New York, was Max the one who helped you get your foot in the door of the music scene there?*

**Belgrave:** He inspired me to move, but I didn't get a chance to play with him until Booker (Little) got sick, and then I subbed for Booker quite a bit. I recorded with them on a couple

of occasions on live concerts at Town Hall and such. I went on the road with him for about three weeks at one point playing in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Kansas City.

**Erdmann:** *What was it like to play on top of the engine he drove?*

**Belgrave:** Whoa-boy! Powerful. Here again I was in a band without a piano. Rehearsals were just horns playing the melodies. I never knew what the tempos were going to be until we got on the gig. Playing with that band was one of my greatest experiences. We had Julian Priester (trombone) and Walter Benton (tenor sax) in the horn line with me in that band, and Ray McKinney on bass.

**Erdmann:** *When you decided to leave New York, you almost moved to Dallas and not Detroit.*

**Belgrave:** True. I had been around the country with Ray, but Dallas was probably my first choice because of the musicality out there. The town was full of great players. I had just missed Ornette Coleman there, but there was a saxophone player called Claude Johnson, who had a sound, if you can imagine this, like Ornette and James Moody combined. James Clay was there and he was the first saxophone player I heard in Dallas. Even before David "Fathead" Newman, Leroy Cooper, and Claude Johnson, Bobby Bradford was the trumpeter playing at a club there. They were great. John Hardy, who ended up teaching high school in Dallas, took me to hear them play there while I was in the service.

I was stationed in Wichita Falls, Texas, and I was going crazy there because there was hardly any music to be had in that area. I met John's wife at one of the USO clubs. I told her I was losing my mind because I wasn't playing enough music. She said, "Hold on, I'll introduce you to my husband who is out on the road a lot." When I met John, he was like my savior because he took me under his wing. He took to Dallas and The Melody Lounge... owned by Jack Ruby. James Clay, Leroy Cooper, and Bobby Bradford played there and they were dynamic cats. Dallas was a happening place. Texas saxophone players were the greatest and were an awakening for me. From then on every Sunday, I would drive the 100 miles from Wichita Falls to Dallas and like I said, it kept me from going crazy.

**Erdmann:** *What was it like to work and record in the small studios Barry Gordy had at Motown? You guys were all packed in like sardines.*

**Belgrave:** It was actually really comfortable. It was a great situation because we musicians made up the music. We'd only get chord sheets for the tunes, so we'd make up the lines. We would build up a series of lines to play behind the singer from scratch. The musicians were very much a part of putting that music together. The studios themselves didn't seem that cramped. We had a piano, organ, bass, drums, usually two guitars, and then five horns, two trumpets, two trombones, and a baritone saxophone, and sometimes an alto or tenor saxophone. Sometimes the rhythm section would be larger than the one I described. The studio accommodated all of us, and it didn't seem as small as it really was. Years later I went back and said, "Wow, I can't believe how small this room is." I just remember it being very comfortable.

**Erdmann:** *The great saxophonist Plas Johnson told me working in a studio is 95 percent boredom, 5 percent sheer terror. How would you describe working the Motown studios?*

**Belgrave:** He said boredom and terror? That's great. I guess Los Angeles was different than Detroit. It was like working with friends. It was fun. We never had music, just chord symbols. We weren't union at the time. We'd do two or three tunes and be there for five or six hours, at least two or three days a week. During the last sessions of the non-union days we were there for hours and hours. In the last month, before the unions came in, we did thirty tunes; they rushed a lot of tunes through. But the daily situation was that we'd be there for four or five hours doing three tunes. We'd come back and do those same three tunes the next day. Now in the meantime the writers would take whatever ideas we had from the first session and then extract and add whatever ideas they had. So when we came back the next day we'd be playing the ideas we had generated, but in a different way because the composers had

worked on the music the previous night. We were actually the creators of that the music, which is why the Funk Brothers has now become so revered. We were the crux behind this music—the whole Motown sound.

**Erdmann:** *You are known as a master teacher, and all of your former students speak very reverently of you, including James Carter who I spoke with just two days ago. How did your work as a teacher begin?*

**Belgrave:** I became deathly ill at the end of 1969. I was teaching some guys, by rote, the music of Buddy Lamp. They couldn't read; all they had was desire. At the time I was doing some pills to keep me up all night, bennies. I didn't realize they were killing me. I would need to stay up late at night in order to work out the music and write up some things. We were on the road and doing a gig in Montreal and my thyroid broke down. I became ill and didn't know what was happening. My body would not excrete anything. I gained about twenty pounds in one week and almost died. A doctor stayed with me, asking me questions, and I told him I was doing a lot of bennies to stay up. I had to stay up 22 hours a day in order to do all this music and then only get two hours of sleep before I'd do it all over again. I don't know for how long I did all of that, but it broke my body down. I had to rest for six weeks. Once the doctor found out what was happening he knocked me out for four weeks. I ended up staying in the hospital for six weeks. While there, he said he knew I wasn't going to stop playing music, but would I at least lay off the trumpet for six months. I was only able to stay off the trumpet for three months, which was difficult.

**Erdmann:** *The trumpet is a physical instrument; you just can't put it down!*

**Belgrave:** You're right, you can't put it down. He restored me by giving me radioactive iodine. He wanted to cut me, but I



L – R: Charlie Gabriel, Joan Belgrave, Marcus Belgrave



MARCUS BELGRAVE'S SOLO ON

BY KENNY DORHAM

# WINOMILL

TRANSCRIBED BY

VERN SIELERT

(BASED ON THE CHORD CHANGES TO SWEET GEORGIA BROWN)

FROM KIRK LIGHTSEY AND MARCUS BELGRAVE'S ALBUM KIRK N' MARCUS (CRISS CROSS 1990)

$\text{♩} = 260$

1  $G^7$

5  $C^7$

9  $F^7$  3

13  $B^b\Delta$   $C-7$   $F^7$   $B^b\Delta$

17  $A^{\flat}7$   $D7(b9)$   $G^7$

21  $C^7$  3

25  $A^{\flat}7$   $D7(b9)$   $G-7$   $A^{\flat}7$   $D7(b9)$   $G-7$

29 C-7 F7 BbΔ A7 Ab7 G7 C-7 F7

35 BbΔ D7 (2ND CHORUS) G7

37 C7

41 F7

45 BbΔ C-7 F7 BbΔ

49 AΔ7 D7(b9) G7

53 C7

57 AΔ7 D7(b9) G-7 AΔ7 D7(b9) G-7

61 C-7 F7 BbΔ A7 Ab7 G7 C-7 F7

(3RD CHORUS)

65  $Bb\Delta$   $D7(b9)$   $G7\#9$

69  $C7$

73  $F7$  3

77 3  $Bb\Delta$   $C-7$   $F7$

80  $Bb\Delta$   $A\emptyset7$   $D7(b9)$   $G7$

84  $C7$

88  $A\emptyset7$   $D7(b9)$   $G-7$   $A\emptyset7$   $D7(b9)$

92  $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta$   $A7$   $Ab7$   $G7$

96  $C-7$  3  $F7$   $Bb\Delta$   $D7(b9)$   $G7$



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*Pre-Bird* (Mercury, 1960)

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*Crying Melodies* (Mijawa, 1994)

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said, "No, I don't want to be cut." I opted for the pill and I still take one every day. It's not bad and it keeps me in balance. I know if I haven't taken my medicine for a couple of days because I'll get real sluggish. It restored me and I feel like it's preserved my life.

**Erdmann:** *As a teacher myself I think I understand this, but I wanted you to elaborate on a quote of yours I found where you said, "As a teacher, I don't feel like I'm teaching, I just feel like I'm*

*opening a door and letting the student teach me."*

**Belgrave:** Where'd you find that?

**Erdmann:** *I do my research.*

**Belgrave:** I can see that. When I came out of the hospital I realized that the only thing I was going to be able to do was to impart some of the information I had learned being out on the road. Whenever I find students who are interested I just try to open up their minds to whatever it is musically they want to

reach. I let them play with me and I share the experiences I've had. I try to open doors for students by turning them on to as much music as I can in the genres I play.

I look for that desire in people, like Geri Allen and Kenny Garrett. I first saw it in them and was able to release the energy they had in themselves to create their own music. I asked Geri to write something that she felt was apropos to what we were playing together. That started her career. She had classical training, as all the best musicians have to have—classical, technical training. I wanted, however, for her to open her mind to bebop. We'd listen to Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Fats Navarro, Clifford (Brown), Miles, and Monk. I teach my students all of those tunes and then they would come back with ideas of their own. I give them the opportunity to play by taking them on gigs with me. I took Geri on lots of gigs with me. She would say, "I can't do this." I would say, "Come on Geri, you can do it." We'd play Italian, Polish, and Jewish weddings; we'd do everything. They were able to put themselves into their music. Kenny Garrett was the same way.

By the time James (Carter) came along I had put together a workshop; I never did call it a big band. We started getting students from all over the state. We'd work two days a week, Monday and Wednesday, and I would dedicate those days to them. We put together a big band, and I'd invite other established musicians to come do seminars with the students and talk to them about music and business. Then I had about five students in the group who started writing for the ensemble. It became a real live entity. So back to the quote, they were teaching me as I was opening the door for them. The energy that they bring is so all encompassing. There was a fellow, John Sinclair, who saw what we were doing and said, "You keep this going, I can get you some grants." I didn't know anything about grants. We were just doing it on the sheer energy of the young people and their desire to learn about jazz. It was a great thing for me, a semi-retired musician.

**Erdmann:** *You're a charter member of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. What was it like to play in the band during its early days?*

**Belgrave:** Wynton was the spearhead. There were two ladies there, Miss Bloomfield and Rahaan Roland Kirk's wife, who were very instrumental in putting that group together. Wynton was doing the same thing I was doing with regard to putting a big band together but was just doing it on a much higher level than I was doing. He also got the kind of financial support he needed in order to make it happen. His father and I are great friends. In fact whenever I go to New Orleans I never get any rest. He'd be waiting for me at the hotel and we'd be in jam

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**"I try to open doors for students by turning them on to as much music as I can in the genres I play."**

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## EQUIPMENT

Trumpet: Kanstul with a Claude Gordon #3 mouthpiece

Flugelhorn: Kanstul with a custom made Schilke mouthpiece

sessions all day. I guess it was just a natural thing that when Wynton and Branford came along they'd be heavily involved in music as well. They knew about me, but that Wynton, he sounds like Clark Terry and Clifford Brown all rolled together. He is a bad young man.

**Erdmann:** *There is no doubt he's a good player. You're still out there playing a lot and have recently added singing to your music. How did it happen that you added your singing voice to your concerts?*

**Belgrave:** It was because of a gentleman here in Detroit,



Performing in New Orleans in 2007

Charlie Gabriel. He sent me down to Indonesia in 1989 with a trio. We were all from Detroit but they had billed us as the Earl Van Riper Quartet from New Orleans. We were taking the place of a group of New Orleans musicians who had been playing there for six months. They were kind of tired of the gig and wanted to go home. Trumpeter Leroy Jones was in the

group we were replacing. Leroy can sing, so anybody who was going to take their place had to have a singer. After two or three weeks of requests I figured I better find myself some Louis Armstrong tunes to sing. I started putting together some songs like, *I'm Going To Sit Right Down*

*And Write Myself A Letter*, and of course, *What A Wonderful World*. Charlie kept encouraging me, he said, "You don't even have to try to sound like Louis, you already do. You got that voice." The minute I started to sing they made me a star down there. I was just following in Leroy Jones's steps.

*Continued on Page 62*

**Erdmann:** *How did you develop your improvisational abilities and what did you do in order to create the incredible improvisatory language you possess?*

**Belgrave:** Number one is that it all goes back to Don Ramus; I listened to singers. Just the mere fact that I worked with Ray Charles all those years helped me learn where to play and where not to play. Improvisation is the hardest thing to learn because you have to learn the scales and then you have to emulate and understand what phrasing is all about. You have to put your scales, your phrasing, and your ability to sing through the horn together in order to come up with ideas. Jazz cats always talk about ideas and I never knew what they were talking about.

I would hear Clifford practice and he would have long silences in between his phrases. I found out that he was writing his ideas out, and then he would play them. In fact, he wrote out the first chorus for me on *How High The Moon*. In that solo he showed me how to move during the changes from major to minor, what the different sounds were, and what you needed to look for. I learned how to make a two-bar phrase lock together with another two-bar phrase. From that solo I learned how ideas could fit together. By the time I got to John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*, I knew what to do.

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“I would hear Clifford practice and he would have long silences in between his phrases. I found out that he was writing his ideas out, and then he would play them.”

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**Erdmann:** *Since this interview is for a trumpet magazine, and you still sound great as a player, what tips do you have to help keep your chops together through time?*

**Belgrave:** You know, I tell guys who have put their horns down, and now want to come back and play again, to do the following exercise, which I still do every day; take an hour and do long tones. Play soft long tones. Hugh Ragin gave me a thing called whisper tones. I do that every day religiously. It keeps the muscles toned and help to play in tune. It also helps me build my range. It was Richard Williams, years ago, who showed me the overtone series which also helped me to build my range. I've run into several musicians over the years, number one being Fats Emory, who showed me some things about embouchure and how to build it, that I show students that need it; it's all about building the strength in your diaphragm. So between building your diaphragm and using the whisper tones I've been able to play. I know that if I don't do those things every day I won't be able to play. If I miss a day I have to do all of it a little longer the next.

*About the author:* Thomas Erdmann is director of the symphony orchestra and professor of music at Elon University. Erdmann has had four books and over 100 articles published in journals as diverse as *Currents in Musical Thought*, *Journal of the Conductor's Guild*, *Women of Note Quarterly*, *Saxophone Journal*, *Jazz Player*, and the *ITG Journal*.

