

Bob Stewart Interview Wide Open Future

Interview and photo by Ken Weiss

Bob Stewart, born February 3, 1945 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, has established himself as a pioneering tubist and a renowned jazz educator. Joachim-Ernst Berendt in The Jazz Book [Lawrence Hill Books, 2009] describes Stewart as possessing the “by far, most powerful tuba sound on the contemporary scene ... He’s the main reason that jazz tuba players today play figures and ostinatos that truly belong to the tuba, no longer imitating the lines of upright bass players, as tuba players did in earlier jazz styles.” Stewart has performed and recorded with such luminaries as Charles Mingus, Gil Evans, Dizzy Gillespie, McCoy Tyner, Sonny Rollins, Carla Bley, Charlie Haden, Lester Bowie, Arthur Blythe, Frank Foster, Muhal Richard Abrams, Jimmy Heath, Henry Threadgill, Wynton Marsalis, David Murray, Don Cherry, Aretha Franklin, Taj Mahal and Chaka Khan. This interview took place on June 11, 2016 at New York City’s Judson Memorial Church prior to his performance at the 21st Annual Vision Festival.

Jazz Inside Magazine: Although you didn’t live there long, you were born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. What other jazz notables hail from that state?

Bob Stewart: [*Laughs*] I don’t really know although [trumpeter] Paul Smoker lived right across the way in Sioux City, Iowa. Let me just clarify the reason I was born there was my father was in the Air Force at the time in 1945. My mother went out to visit him and gave birth to me out there, otherwise I’d have been born in New York where she was living at the time. I’d love to go back to South Dakota and see Mount Rushmore.

Jl: Your father, Riley Stewart, was also a Hall of Fame Negro League pitcher. Did you inherit his athletic prowess?

BS: I was a pretty good athlete, yeah, but I just had another path. I decided to play music from the 6th grade up. I played Little League baseball and I still swim and ride a bike.

Jl: You first played trumpet?

BS: Right, my first instrument was trumpet and I loved it, from 5th and 6th grade through high school, and got a scholarship to college in Philadelphia. But into my second year of college I was having embouchure problems and I knew I had to do a graduation recital, so I switched to a larger mouthpiece and just trained new muscle rather than trying to retrain trumpet muscles. That’s how I switched to tuba and I started to love it more and more and the momentum has carried me through this music.

Jl: You've devoted your career to the tuba. What makes tuba such a great instrument?

BS: First of all, it's got a future that's wide open. Other than what has happened, say in the last years since I've been in New York from '68, and what Ray Draper did before that, and what Don Butterfield did in the '50s with Clark Terry, it's wide open for what the tuba can do. I've learned how to play bass in contemporary ensembles and I've learned how to be an ensemble horn in big bands for David Murray and Frank Foster. There's also other positions right in the middle, right in the crack, which you can develop and create, where you're halfway between a bass player and a horn player. Like in Tony Malaby's ensemble. I'm not really a bass player for him, he's got cello too, so I found a space right in there around trombone range, back into the tuba range, where you can create colors and counterpoint and it's absolutely wide open for tuba players. Jose Davila is doing the same thing with Henry Threadgill. Henry doesn't want a traditional bassist but there's a space in there that you can really develop and evolve through and that's what some of the young tuba players are doing now which makes it wide open for them to start on the instrument and help to create the history.

Jl: What can't you do on tuba that you'd like to be able to do?

BS: Things I can't do is what I don't have time to practice for. I mean it can do whatever, the tuba's limitation has to do with your skill, just like any instrument. There's certain things that I'm not necessarily looking to do due to my concept of how to present the instrument. I don't need to play extreme high, although I can. I'm not looking to do everything the tuba can do. I'm looking to do what is kind of my signature, and what feels comfortable to my body in a certain way. I'm not really looking to be just a virtuoso on tuba who can play everything and anything. That doesn't interest me. There's some tuba players that I think play way better than me. There's a bunch of them, actually. There's a gentleman I just worked with last summer in Portugal, Sergio Carolino, and he's just a monster. He can play anything, anything you write down or tell him to play. That's his personality, but that's not what I'm looking to do, I'm looking to compliment. What I suggest for all musicians is to create a space for your bandleader, or yourself if you're the bandleader. Create a space that the bandleader would tell you to play had they thought of it. Therefore, everything you play, they look at you and say, "Wow, that's great." So you become simpatico with the person you're working for and you compliment the things they're trying to do, then you have to make a gear shift when it becomes your band so you figure out a way to do that while you still allow yourself to be the band leader and do what you have to do. It's a very delicate place to be, for any musician, to compliment the band while not necessarily trying to show off.

Jl: What other instruments are you proficient on?

Jl: None. I've played trumpet in the '70s in Taj Mahal's band and there were four tubas and we all doubled on other instruments. I went back to playing fluegelhorn in that band but I don't really practice it. It's like a jealous girlfriend. It doesn't really play that. *[Laughs]*

Jl: In a 1981 interview you did for *The New York Times*, you addressed *Down Beat Magazine's* annual poll and the fact that tuba was listed in the "Miscellaneous Instrument" category. You said, "It's frustrating to be in the miscellaneous list where somebody who plays hubcaps gets 20 votes and all I get is 10." It's now 35 years later and the good news is that in that magazine's 2015 critic poll, you were not beaten out by anyone playing hubcaps but tuba still is listed in the miscellaneous category. You finished tied in the 18th spot with fellow tubist Howard Johnson. You were behind banjo, harmonica, mandolin, kora, oud and even a harmonium player. *[NOTE- The 2016 Down Beat Critic Poll did not place any tuba player in the latest "Miscellaneous Instrument" category, which came out after this interview took place, although Wycliffe Gordon and Marcus Rojas did rank in the "Rising Misc. Instrument" list. Full disclaimer – I voted both years in the poll.]*

BS: Exactly, I think they're missing an opportunity, particularly when there are other jazz magazines in Europe where tuba has its own category. Why shouldn't tuba have its own category, particularly since it's one of the original instruments of jazz? I can understand it 30 years ago, because there weren't that many tuba players to create a category with, but that's not true now. There's just so many great tuba players out there. I don't want to be critical of *[Down Beat]* but they are absolutely missing a beat and they should be on top of that. I think they are doing a disservice to tuba by even listing it as miscellaneous. It's not nice, not nice. *[Laughs]*

Jl: Are you surprised that 50 years after you started playing tuba in jazz groups that the tuba has not become more popular than it has?

BS: I don't think that's true, I think it's become very popular. I went to the [NYC] Winter Jazzfest a couple years ago and they had six different venues running and each one had a tuba player playing in the ensemble, which was totally thrilling. I think there's a lot of opportunities for tuba players and there's a lot of young tuba players coming up like Ben Stapp and Jose Davila. Joe Dailey is very prominent playing with a lot of people. There's a number of great tuba players in Europe such as Michel Godard in France, who is a fabulous player. Three years ago I started a tuba competition, and I use the word competition just to attract attention. It's kind of a get together where I invite tuba players who have ensembles to submit a tape and I choose the top four to come. I've found some really fine tuba players.

Jl: Howard Johnson has been upfront about his frustrations early on concerning how the tuba was capable of doing so much more than what he was being offered. Today's jazz composers and small

group leaders certainly understand tuba better now. How close are they to understanding and utilizing tuba's full potential?

BS: I think they're much further along than in 1968, when I came to New York, because I had the opportunity to play in a bunch of big collective bands - Frank Foster's big band, Carla Bley's big band. Carla Bley and Gil Evans were two of the writers then that were really exploring the tuba. Sometimes Gil would write things that I couldn't play and I had to take it home and work on it, and after a couple months I'd bring it back and I'd have it together. It was really up high. In the ensemble note stack it was above trumpet, at a real winey, real emotional level. So he helped expand my ability on the instrument. He was hearing stuff for the tuba to play way beyond what I could play at the time. It's a give and take. He had heard Howard [Johnson] play those notes in a different context and it inspired Gil to write a certain way. I look forward to being asked to do things I can't play because it just makes me a better player. I think now writers are starting to get it. Back in the time of Frank Foster's big band, most big band parts had the tuba part paralleled with the baritone saxophone, so we basically had the same notes, and both of us were paralleled with the bass player, which is like three voices that are playing in unison which is kind of silly. That has totally changed, tuba now has its own voice.

Jl: I spoke with a number of tubists in preparing for this interview and they uniformly credited you with opening up the field for tuba. [Tubist] Jose Davila said, "Bob has been able to fit himself in a lot of situations and be functional, not just be a section player, but functional in the creative aspect of what is being played and integral. He's not just hanging out, waiting for his solo, he's part of the band."

BS: That's what I was saying before about applying yourself to the person you're working with. Even if the part isn't written, you know what your instrument does and where it sounds best and what best fits, and so it behooves you to therefore apply that. That way the composer turns and looks at you and smiles and doesn't turn around and say, "Don't play that."

Jl: Tuba requires large expenditures of breath, especially when supplying basslines. You invented a technique to deal with that problem. What is the breathing concept you call "panting?"

BS: You don't need to have all the air that you need at every given time because there's a method. When I started working with Arthur Blythe he asked me, "Bob, can you play bass on tuba?" I said, "Yeah, of course." That was one of those instances where I didn't have it together yet so I immediately went home and practiced. I'd played bass in Dixieland ensembles but not in contemporary settings. I got it together at home. What notes do I play? How do you play through a blues? What notes do you play in-between that 1 and the 4 chord? How do you choose what those notes are? Once you figure that out, then you have to figure out how to take a breath. You have to figure out ways of playing time and keeping

time so you don't interfere with that cymbal beat. Rather than taking one giant breath every time you need a breath, you take a breath in-between each note so you can keep playing the notes as they go by. You use your diaphragm and you pant, so in-between your diaphragm pushing out and bringing air in, you play a note.

Jl: How does "panting" differ from circular breathing?

BS: Circular breathing is one breath while you're playing four or five notes, it's not a series of breaths in-between each note. It's different. For some things, I'll circular breath, for others, I'll "pant" breath. Sometimes I'll even change the rhythm so I can exhale. I've also figured out a way to just exhale in-between, I can cut out that gag response. You inhale and exhale through your nose at the same time, which is really bizarre.

Jl: Are other players using "panting?"

BS: They may, I don't know.

Jl: Are you teaching it to your students?

BS: I wrote a book called *The Breathing Baseline* and I describe how to do it and sometimes I'll have a private lesson with a student and show them how to do it and it becomes a real "aha" moment for them.

Jl: How limiting has breath expenditure still restricted what you creatively mean to do on tuba?

Jl: You also developed a new way to mic the instrument.

BS: I'm not sure if it's so new but it's a mic that's suspended in my bell. I use a pair of thick suspenders to hook on four sides of the bell and the mic doesn't touch anything. You really get the sound of the instrument. A lot of people have gone to condenser mics, the little mic you hook on the edge of the bell but I think you lose a whole range of the sound of the instrument. Some people still just tape the mic to the edge of the bell.

Jl: You moved to New York City in 1968 with a steady gig at a Dixieland club [Your Father's Moustache]. Did you come with the intent to find work wherever you could or was your plan to be a jazz player?

BS: My mind hadn't even developed at that point what I wanted to do. I was interested in jazz for the long term view, Dixieland was just a means to the end. My first gig in Philly was at Your Father's Moustache, which was a chain of Dixieland clubs, and as I got better at doing it, the New York club hired me for Friday and Saturdays. I would drive up there every weekend after teaching school and that's how I met Howard Johnson. He came in to get paid one night and saw another black tuba player on stage. During that time, Howard would get other gigs and he would send me to sub for him. So I got a chance to sub with McCoy Tyner over at Slugs around the time he had released *Tender Moments*. Also around that time, 1967, I was working with Carla Bley singing in her *Escalator Over the Hill* opera. I subsequently got the gig with Carla in her band and in Gil Evans' band.

Jl: By the time you hit New York, Dixieland had evolved to a predominantly white musician's genre outside of New Orleans. Was it unusual that you, an African American, were performing it?

BS: I just wanted to play. I wasn't so concerned about color. I wasn't that conscious about the history so much that I would even concern myself with it. I mean I had enough to do to figure out how to play basslines correctly. I will say it became particularly striking when I got a Dixieland gig as a leader and I wanted to call musicians and I realized I couldn't call anybody black because nobody really understood how to play it. I had to hire a white band and that brought the realization to me more than anything. It didn't bother me that the players were white, they were great musicians.

Jl: Do you still play Dixieland?

BS: Sure, I've got a gig Tuesday. Check it out at the River Club!

Jl: How did you deal with not getting enough chances to play the music you really wanted to play in the beginning?

BS: What I tell other tuba players or any instrumentalists, you have to figure ways not to get depressed. You have to take a gig and then wait for the next good gig to happen, which may come in six months or so. Over a two year time you look at those times you've gotten those gigs and you notice if the distance in-between them has gotten shorter, and so therefore you can choose to be encouraged. You can choose to be impatient, and just be pissed off all the time, or you can choose to be encouraged because you see them getting closer and closer together, and that's what I've chosen to do. Living in New York, you have to have faith in the process.

Jl: Howard Johnson preceded you in New York City by 5 years. What was his impact on your career?

BS: It was totally changing, he gave me direction. I had the gig at My Father's Mustache and then I met Howard and he just totally introduced a whole other world that the tuba could do with improvising and what I needed to learn. I would go over to his place and play after I finished up at the club at 3:30 AM, after playing there for six hours. Can you imagine a six hour gig and blowing hard? My chops were swollen. And getting the chance to sub for him with people like McCoy Tyner just opened up a whole new world. It gave me direction because I didn't know that existed. It answers the question you asked me earlier in terms of was I thinking of playing jazz, because I wasn't, I was thinking about playing the tuba and wanting to play great, and then I found that other world and knew I wanted to go in that direction. I wasn't so presumptuous because had I been, I may not have come to New York. Think about it man, I'm gonna go to New York and play a jazz tuba? Huh, what would make me think that? I would have talked myself out of that and I probably wouldn't have come. I opened myself up to play jazz in big bands including Sam Rivers' big band, a more free improv big band in '76, and by '83, I got a chance to play with Globe Unity Orchestra, which is a totally free improv European big band. In doing that, I really found, and I'm sure I'd get a lot of argument on this next statement I'm about to make, I found that there's not very much difference between playing free and playing Dixieland. There's not really a whole lot of difference in terms of the application of it. Now true, when you play Dixieland, you're in one key, and there's a set of chord changes you have to play, but other than that, what you have to do is listen, and you have to compliment. Question, answer, statement, you have to compliment what's going on, and that's exactly what you have to do playing free. It may not stay in the same key, but what you have to do to play it appropriately is to listen to what somebody's playing and compliment it. At some point, an interaction has to happen and you must use the same tools you use in Dixieland. Check it out. That's how I look at it, that's the thing that allows me to play both.

Jl: I spoke with Howard Johnson about you and he said, "The only thing I don't like about talking in interviews about Bob is that they end up talking about me too much. He has such powerful gifts. It gives me too big a presence in his story."

BS: Well, I certainly give him credit, there's not enough credit to be given. He is very generous, he set the example for me. For example, the way I talk about Jose Davila and Joe Daley and Ben Stapp. Each one is very different, no more the same than all the trumpet players they list in *Down Beat*. Howard's generosity has taught me how to be generous with these other young cats that are coming along and encourage everything they do.

Jl: Howard Johnson also said, "I was in Europe in the early '90s and somewhere along the line, probably from Bob's records, the European tuba players got into this funky bassline thing. They treated it like it was this new original thing but it was something that Bob Stewart was doing 25 years before."

BS: It's probably true, which is great. Anybody who listens to them playing knows where it's come from, I don't have to say anything. I think it's fantastic. It's like if you hear somebody playing like Miles, you say they're playing like Miles. If they deny it, then that's a whole other story. I take it as a big compliment although I encourage people not to sound like me. They're bodies are very different from mine so therefore what they play should be different than me. If they try to play like me they will just be called a copy rather than becoming they're own voice.

Jl: How much of an influence on you were early jazz tubists Ray Draper and Red Callender?

BS: What they showed me was the direction that they chose. Ray Callender did more bassline, and he also played melodies, just like Don Butterfield did in the '50s with Clark Terry. It showed me it was one of the possibilities. I see that all the time when I go to tuba conferences and all the tuba players are there denying that it's a bass instrument. They all play really high and they play transcriptions of violin and cello concertos, all in the upper register of their instrument, even when the jazz players get up to play, they're all playing the melody. Which is great, but they also have a bass player in their ensemble, and they're not playing bass. I don't understand it. It's almost like there's a whole thing where you're trying to prove something of the instrument. You're trying to prove we can play melodies, we can play high, we can play fast. If they can get past that, and take all that stuff as a given...I play fast when I think it's necessary but it's not something that I'm just trying to show off that the instrument plays fast. There's a story I have from a while ago, when I put my first ensemble together in 1980. I was playing tuba as the bass in the ensemble and I took the tape to Gil Evans and asked him to check it out. Up to that time, people had complimented me on how I sounded just like a bass and I was real proud. Gil listened to it and said, "Yeah, Bob, it sounds great, but it just sounds like a bass." I had to go home and figure out what I had lost. In making the instrument sound like a bass I had lost the tuba. And that's one of the things I hear with these young players, they play phenomenal, they're all over the horn, but they've lost the instrument. They're so busy proving they can do all these other things, they've lost the instrument.

Jl: There wasn't a vast legacy of jazz tubists to draw from before you hit the scene but your early influences seem unusual. Listening to Monk's left hand taught you about playing basslines and you learned things from vocalists such as Johnny Hartman.

BS: One of the things I learned was how to orchestrate for the trumpet and trombone players in my quintet. How do I play the melody and how do I orchestrate for them in order to play the melody? Trumpet is easy because it's far enough away from me that I can put his notes in, but trombone basically

is in the baritone register where I'm playing, like Johnny Harman or Nat King Cole's voice. That baritone range, and what it means for the trombone in order for him to accompany me, he has to be in the upper part of his register so I have to put him way up in order to make my horn speak. Whatever notes I'm playing as a fifth, there's at least a fourth or a fifth above me that nobody's touching so therefore it isolates my horn. My notes get lost if you hit a cymbal with a sizzle in it, they're gone for the next four beats, so you have to really figure out how to isolate the horn in order to write it. That's what I learned from Johnny Hartman, from Brook Benton, how they orchestrated the ensemble around their voice so they weren't touched by anybody. That was just so I could play melody on certain songs. I heard their approach to playing melody because they are me, or maybe I should say, I'd like to be them. That's if I want to play melody, other times I'm playing in unison with the horn players or I'll have the guitar player play bass and I'll become an ensemble player.

Jl: How did you market yourself to other musicians after arriving in New York?

BS: I didn't, I just played. So people heard me, whether it was with Gil Evans or Carla Bley or with Arthur Blythe, particularly. It's interesting, Olu Dara told me something recently. I had done a concert with him in New York City in the late '70s or early '80s, along with Doug Hammond, Arthur and myself. Olu watched me playing bass during the two hour concert and he didn't say anything. Years later now, he came to me and said, "You know Bob, when we did that concert, I said I'm gonna give him about seven more years to be doing that before he blows his chops." He told me, "But you're still doing that. How'd you figure out how to do that so you could play that long and not hurt your chops?" Well, you have to think about it, that's for sure. You have to figure out how to mic the instrument, how to play through an amplifier so I'm not blowing through the volume of the drums all the time. If I had been doing that for the last thirty years I would have a problem right now, it's true. I had to figure out how to breathe. Everything I learned to do in order to play basslines on the tuba, I had to create because it did not exist. There was nobody playing tuba in a contemporary jazz ensemble. Dixieland, yes, but to play four on the tuba for a seven minute tune, you have to have the strength as well as the knowledge of how to breathe and to keep things relaxed because the minute you tense up, you get tired. I had nobody to ask. Howard was playing melodies, it wasn't his thing to play an amp or do what I was doing. He wasn't looking to be a bass player on tuba, particularly. It was just trial and error, cut lips, and just figuring out how to do it and do it better. All that to get to the place where Gil Evans said, "Yes, that's great Bob, it just sounds like a bass." By that time, I'd gotten slick enough so that I could make it happen and make it sound easy, but I also lost the tuba in doing it and had to go back and find out how did I play the tuba when I didn't know how to?

Jl: You spent time with Charles Mingus, would you share a memory about him?

BS: There's lots of stories, lots of crazy stories about Mingus, but he was very generous. When I got in the band, I had come from Sam Rivers so I was playing with a big sound and Mingus loved that. He came to me and asked me if I could get a baritone and trumpet player that had the same strength when they played because the baritone player and trumpet player had left his band and he was nervous. I told him no problem and I went and got Hamiet Bluiett, because we both were working with the Sam Rivers Ensemble. Joe Gardner was the trumpet player I got. This was in '71, I was 26-years-old, and he took the word of a 26-year-old tuba player and brought two cats up in his band. He taught me something about how you hire your musicians. You hire people that you trust. You trust what they play musically and therefore you can probably trust a lot more than that about them. He came to me and asked me that and I'm thinking, 'With all the cats in this band, he's asking me about players?'

Jl: One of your early recordings was *Afro-Cuban Jazz Moods* with Dizzy Gillespie and Machito in 1975. What do you recall from that session?

BS: Actually, I went in and overdubbed my part. I met Machito, he was there, but I stood in the studio with headphones on and played my parts with the tracks running. Other cats from Machito's band were there but nobody else was playing but me. That was way before I ever met Dizzy. I got into Dizzy's band in 1987, he had his 70th Anniversary Big Band and we traveled around Europe and Japan.

Jl: That seems to be your only Latin jazz recording?

BS: Well, it's not an option. It's not like I'm turning anything down. It's not often they have tubas in Latin ensembles. They have lots of horns but it's not often they have tubas.

Jl: How did Arthur Blythe help you develop your role in small group playing?

BS: That's where I learned to use an amp. I had been getting all those mouth cuts because Arthur had a loud drummer, Bobby Battle, who would smash that cymbal and I would try to play to the volume of that cymbal. Through the process of playing those tunes, I learned what amp to use, how to use the microphone, and how to "pant" breathe. At the time, I would put on a whole stack of records and just keep playing and develop the strength to keep playing because it's not something you can develop without doing it because you don't know what it feels like to be tired until you get tired. You don't know what to do after you get tired, till you get tired. There's certain exercises you can do in order to build tensile strength, there's resistance exercises to build certain kinds of muscle, but usually when people train, they don't train tired. You don't lift weights and keep lifting after you're tired because that's when you'll hurt something. So there's not a way that you can practice for it but in order to learn what it's gonna feel like when you're doing it, you have to do it and be tired. You have to understand how to keep playing while still being tired. And then you also have to understand how to correct the problems just

created by doing that. You have to practice certain exercises just to bring your chops back together and fix it because if you play tired, you're gonna play wrong. So after you've done that, you've got to go back and do maintenance. All this stuff I had to learn. If you play through an amplifier for any given time, like two weeks if you're on tour, if you can, every night you should play long tones because when you come home after two or three weeks of playing through an amplifier, and play without an amplifier, you're gonna hear a lot of noise in your sound, because playing through that amplifier covers up a multitude of sins. You're gonna hear that noise because you're not putting very much air into the horn, so you have to practice filling the horn up to get your sound back. A lot of horn players, not just tuba players, find themselves in trouble after playing in the mic because they're not really playing full, and then all of a sudden, when they have to play acoustically and play full, they can't do it and wonder why. Everyone has to learn maintenance. You see a lot of horn players having embouchure problems and that's what it has to do with. That's what Olu Dara didn't understand when he thought I would have problems with my playing. He didn't understand the maintenance side which allows for my longevity.

Jl: Is it required that you practice longer than, say a saxophone player?

BS: I can't really speak for saxophone players, they don't have a piece of steel up against their chops. [Laughs] They don't have this big chunk of metal banging up against their teeth. If you have crooked teeth like this, it cuts on the inside of your chops, and even if you don't have crooked teeth. Any tour that Lester Bowie did, everybody in the band would be all cut up inside their mouths that first week because that's what just happens because you're blowing hard and you don't have the option of backing off. Next year it's gonna be forty years that I've been doing this.

Jl: Your solo on Arthur Blythe's *Lenox Avenue Breakdown* [Columbia, 1979] title track has been judged by *The Penguin Guide to Jazz* as "One of the few genuinely important tuba statements in jazz." Any comments on that?

BS: I'm thrilled they think so. I never thought about it that way. Howard has taken some great solos in a lot of Gil Evans' things so I think they need to get out more. [Laughs] On the Gil Evans recording with "Voodoo Child" by Jimi Hendrix, Howard does a phenomenal job, as well as any number of solos he's taken on albums.

Jl: John Carter's 1979 album *Variations on Selected Themes for Jazz Quintet* [Moers] imaginatively combined you with Carter on clarinet, Bobby Bradford on trumpet, James Newton on flute and Philip Wilson on drums. That music still sounds so modern. How did you approach working with that unique grouping of instruments in a jazz setting?

BS: In a certain way it's an unusual grouping for a jazz band but if you think about it, it's a Dixieland band minus a chordal instrument. We just applied ourselves to the situation. Quite often in that ensemble I was the bass. So basically it was a jazz ensemble without piano or a guitar and I was the bass. We were playing a lot of things freely, while at the same time, Bobby was playing bebop and hardbop, although he would stretch it. John Carter chose his band to reflect their totally different personalities. Each one soloed differently so I got the chance to play different for each one of them. It made me dig deep in order to figure out how not to play the same thing. It was a great recording. The photo for the album was taken from a three-story apartment created out of a windmill and the photographer was sitting on his balcony looking down on the ensemble. I remember it very clearly. It was in Germany but it was right on the Holland border so you still had windmills.

Jl: I asked Bobby Bradford about that session and he didn't remember the specifics of the session because it was so long ago but he did recall you almost having a fight with a taxi driver for mishandling your tuba in Holland or France at that time.

BS: They want to put your instrument in their taxi but they don't know how to handle it and they don't know that they don't know how to handle it. I couldn't have my instrument damaged so I had to demand to put it in myself. It's just a matter of survival. I had a big, cumbersome case at the time which wasn't helpful.

Jl: A few days ago you led a "Remembering Lester Bowie" program at Tribeca Performing Arts. What should people remember about Lester Bowie?

BS: What most people are gonna remember are the things he did musically. If they listen to the music, they've got to know that he was also another generous person. I've been very fortunate to have bandleaders like Mingus and Lester and Carter and Bobby Bradford, all of them were very, very generous. Generous in giving you what you were going to play and allowing you to develop through their music. They were very smart people. They saw somebody who was looking to apply themselves to them and they let him. You grew through their music and it made their music sound better. That's one of things that Lester did. He gave me my head playing tuba bass in that ensemble because he trusted what I was gonna play was going to be correct. I got back to playing the tuba with him and over the next greater than ten years of playing with Brass Fantasy, it not only taught me a whole other way to play the instrument, but it also helped develop other tuba players, such as Marcus Rojas, who came through the band. There's something else that people are not going to know about Lester, usually bandleaders don't encourage you to leave if you're a good player, but Lester did. There were great players that came out of that band early – Steve Turre and Craig Harris for example. Lester encouraged people to do their own thing. He told me I was playing great in the band and to not let it finish here. He said, "Make sure you use the momentum of this gig to spin off and create your own thing. Don't let it end here because they will say you weren't all that good, you were with Brass Fantasy." By 1987, I'd put a demo together with my own quintet, that's when I was still doing stuff with Brass Fantasy, and I got my first CD by 1988.

Based on all the people I had played with, I got a six week tour as a leader. He put that on me. He was a wonderful person. I miss him.

Jl: You've done work for a number of Pop, Rock and Soul artists including Aretha Franklin, Chaka Khan, the Dap-Kings and Elvis Costello. What stands out from those experiences?

BS: The other great young musicians in all those ensembles. As a matter of fact, one of the musicians in the Dap-Kings, Dave Guy, was my student in high school and he is now playing on the Jimmy Fallon show. As a matter of fact, Dave got me the gig in the Dap-Kings when they needed a tuba player. The Chaka Khan thing was because Paul Simon did an arrangement for the tuba behind Chaka Khan and Paul was there when I taped it.

Jl: You've also done movie and TV work including *Boardwalk Empire* and *Alvin and the Chipmunks*.

BS: Yeah, that's big fun. I did one episode of *Boardwalk Empire* during the second season and *Alvin* was very recent. It was a lot of fun. I basically overdubbed my part while just listening to drums and trumpet. It just came out and I listened to it and it was really great. It sounded like a song that Bruno Mars might do. Check it out.

Jl: Would you talk about your 9/11 experience?

BS: I was teaching at LaGuardia High School Performing Arts and one of my students came in the room and yelled, "A plane just flew into the World Trade Center." I said, 'Yeah, sure it did.' He said, "No, no, Mr. Stewart, really it did." And so when I had a break, I went up to the office, and there was a TV running, and I was totally amazed. One of my students was scared to death because his father worked down there so he left school. The subways weren't running so he walked down there and then he walked across the Brooklyn Bridge. His dad hadn't gone in the building yet, it crashed before he got there, so he turned around and went back home. Vincent Chancey told me he went down there to pick his child up from the school on Chambers Street and while walking away, turned around just as the building collapsed. I can just imagine how the collapsing building must be etched in the minds of the people who watched it happen. I'm glad I didn't see that. It's hard enough to watch it just on television.

Jl: The last questions have been obtained from other artists:

Kirk Knuffke (trumpet) asked – “Do you feel being a trumpet player first helped you become such a great tuba player?”

BS: Yes, because where I came through, had I been a tuba player, the parts would have been limited and what I’d been asked to do would have been limited. That’s not taking into consideration my personality. My personality would have been looking to do more, but I don’t know that, but I think I would have been looking for more. But based on what tuba players were given to play, I probably would not have developed the technique that I had on trumpet at the time because they just don’t ask tuba players to do much. Now, I wouldn’t necessarily say that, but then they weren’t asked much.

Lucian Ban (piano) asked – “I’ve been fortunate to work and tour with you for the past almost 15 years. Although we have a few great tuba players in modern jazz, such as Howard Johnson and Joe Daley, none of them sound like you. There’s something unique in the way you play the low instrument. What do YOU think separates you from all the other players?”

BS: It just has to do with where my emphasis is. Howard Johnson’s whole emphasis is melody, he has a great upper register and he plays melodies. And even when he’s playing bass, he’ll hit a couple bass notes, and the next thing you know, he’s up here around where the trombone plays and then he’ll come back down and play some bass notes and move back up again. But I see that I hear down there, and when I’m doing down there, there’s a certain soberness about what I’m doing and it doesn’t need that. It doesn’t need for me to go up in the upper register just to satisfy some other part of my soul. There’s a certain reverence that I have for the bass that I hear that makes me stay there. I think it just has to do with the approach and my approach is going after the bass part of the instrument. There’s a sound thing I’m looking for when I go down there. Sometimes I’ll hit notes long enough so you can really hear the sound of it. That sound really does something, it makes the audience feel that, and if you cut the note short, it’s not the same thing. The upright bass players let it ring because they understand what that sound does to people and I don’t think all tuba players hear notes like that and so they’re not gonna give them the same emphasis. I think that has to do with how and what people hear and what’s important to them.

Howard Johnson (tuba, baritone sax) asked about a topic you’ve touched on earlier. He said, “I’d like to hear you talk about the 1971 Taj Mahal band that included four tubists - you, 20-year-old Joe Daley, 17-year-old Earl McIntyre, and me. All four of us also played other instruments and the idea was to give Taj a horn section that had a bunch of different sounds because he’s an eclectic blues man. There were some tunes where all four of the tubas were playing at once and they were passing out in the Fillmore!

They'd never heard anything like that! It came to be after a friend of mine brought Taj to a rehearsal of Gravity and Taj said he wanted to try something like that – tuba players who played other instruments."

BS: It was a great time that lasted from January through March. After it was over, it was like being on this high for three months and then all of a sudden - CRASH. All I was doing afterwards was watching TV. When I think of that time, all I can think of was NBC's jingle for their upcoming Fall programming because I heard it so often it just got etched in my brain because my real brain was back there doing the tour. Traveling all up and down the West Coast, playing the Fillmore East, the Fillmore West. The first gig after the Fillmore East was Pittsburgh, opposite Little Richard. We went to Vancouver. I saw a landslide in the Oregon mountains while we were driving down the road. There were whole trees laid down across the road that clogged the river running next to the road and the river was running across the road. These are the memories that are etched in my brain from that time, it was so powerful to me. We stayed at a dude ranch. I was 26-years-old so it was like a whole other kind of world opened up. We thought we were hip jazz musicians going out to California. It was in the middle of that peace and love movement with people dancing and here we are playing – [*sings a tuba bassline*] – and we look out into the audience and nobody's moving to the beat that we're playing. The whole audience is like, "Wooo." And we're like, 'Where in the hell are we?' [*Laughs*] This is all etched in my brain, and that's just the emotional part, never mind being on stage and the power of that music. It was just UNBELIEVABLE. Unbelievable, as a 26-year-old kid? Hearing that and being in that audience of 2-3 thousand people? We played Big Boulder, Colorado and there must have been 8-10 thousand people all bobbing and dancing. Can you imagine? I think about it now and get goosebumps just thinking about that music and the power from that rhythm section. It was a great time. John Simon was the producer, he also produced Janis Joplin.

Jl: So you went from performing incredibly powerful music in front of massive audiences to doing nothing when it ended. How did you deal with that?

BS: Fortunately, about a month later, it went back up again because that's when Mingus hired some of the band to play starting with the Newport Jazz Festival in New York City.

Joe Daley (tuba, trombone) asked – "What practice routines do you use to develop your signature creative bass patterns that are now an essential element in your approach to brass bass playing."

BS: There's multiple approach things that have to happen. One is figuring out counterpoint and the other is technical, in terms of just endurance and practicing things that make you have to keep playing. Sometimes I'll just practice octave jumps, so I'm practicing my breathing. I'm also practicing the sound, making each one of the notes come out accurately. I'll go up chromatically and then come back down. While I'm doing that, I'm doing endurance and breathing, so therefore, if I get a tune where something needs to be played like that, I don't have to think about it, I can just do it. If you have to think about something, it causes a delay in the music. I practice things so that there won't be any delays and then I

figure out how to apply that to a tune. There's a whole multistep process to creating that bassline for the tune.

Michel Godard (tuba, serpent) asked – “I remember doing a concert in Paris with you at least 20 years ago and in an interview with French TV you said you would like to play basslines for Miles Davis. I would love to know who you'd like to play your beautiful basslines for now?”

BS: Back then it was a fantasy. You know how you dream? One of my jobs in college was as a busboy and I would work all day, one day a week, and there was a band at night at this club and I said, ‘One of these days I'm gonna be on stage.’ So back then I could hear the tuba in Miles' band, particularly during that electric period. I could hear the tuba all up in there and I thought that Miles needed to hire a tuba player. Now, there's a couple different trios I think a tuba would do well in. I see it working with Bill Charlap's trio with Kenny and Peter Washington. That's a dynamite trio. That's one of the next projects I would like to do, a traditional jazz trio like that. I want to document the tuba doing that, playing melody at times and then bass at times. That's the next thing I'd like to do.

Jose Davila (tuba, trombone) asked – “How did you balance being a teacher and also being a high-level performing musician? That's very interesting. I'm a teacher as well and you helped me a whole lot. You dispelled the whole adage of “those who can't play, teach” and also many musicians start teaching and then they don't play. You preached both and you've had high, high quality musicians flowing out of your classes.”

BS: When I first started doing it, playing and staying up late and teaching, every day I'd come home from teaching and sleep for an hour. When I'd wake up, I'd practice for two hours without question, every day because I was determined to play, determined to get better. That's what a lot of instrumentalists that teach don't do. You have to really want to do it because the tendency is, after you get that check, and certain things you don't have to want for anymore, you get a little lazy. You stop getting on your instrument every day and suddenly you stop getting calls. That process of moving up through the thing, however that works, stops happening because you stopped practicing. I've seen a bunch of young, great players that have had that happen to them. You have to just discipline yourself. I don't have that discipline in a lot of things, but in that I did. I did the same thing when my first son was born in '86. I kept practicing and it created a whole inspiration of compositions because he was born and I said, ‘I need to get up off my ass.’ Within a year and a half of his birth, I recorded my first recording [*First Line*] for JMT Records. You have to inspire yourself however you need to because you can't get complacent with it. I've slowed down a little bit now but I still sit down and dig in regularly. Sometimes I realize I need to stop for a while just to figure out what direction to head in. You have to think about it, you can't just keep playing blindly, otherwise you're not going anywhere. When I do that I have to not feel guilty about not practicing. It's a Catch-22.

Jose Davila also asked: "What is your philosophy of life that leads you to success and prosperity in multiple segments of your life? I'm asking because it's apparent to me that you do have a belief system."

BS: Wow, I always want to be better. I've taught jazz history at Juilliard for the last 16 years and I don't think I've taught the course twice the same way because every year I learn something different and every year I approach the first class differently. It's just like playing in an ensemble, I don't play tonight what I played last night. I'm not interested in playing the same and I teach that same way. I have a year old son and I'm hanging out with him differently than I did with my other son, who's now 30. Hopefully, I'm doing it better. He came to me this morning different than he had before and I was thrilled. We were reading a book and he cuddled up in my lap and I thought, 'Wow, he's never done this before,' which is very cool. It's confirmation, yeah, I'm getting' better. I'm trying to get better, really, I'm trying to get better.