

Walt Szymanski

Began his musical journey from a small home on the east side of Detroit that was constantly resonating with the sound of music. Listening to his mother play and sing the Broadway standards on the family piano and hearing the records of Nat Cole, Frank Sinatra, Dizzy Gillespie and Al Hirt as well as the constant refrains of the ever present Motown sound presented him a tremendous musical foundation upon which to build.

The age of seven found Walt as a soprano soloist in the 120 voice, all male choir of St. Raymond in the Archdiocese of Detroit. He made his first professional appearance at that time, singing as well as soloing in front of an audience of 3000 at Ford Auditorium. As the choir began to performed more in orchestral situations, Walt was able to hear the beautiful sonority of the trumpet as it soared above the masses. His love quickly changed from vocalizing to playing the trumpet and upon entering high school he quickly captured first chair in wind ensemble and orchestra as well as playing lead trumpet in the jazz big band and school pit orchestra. In his senior year of high school, Walt was presented the Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia award for the "Best Jazz Trumpet" in the State of Michigan.

After a brief flirtation with medical studies, and a year of classical trumpet studies at the University of Michigan, Walt transferred to Oakland University in Rochester, Mi., where an emerging Jazz Studies Program under the direction of Marvin "Doc" Holladay seemed to be the direction he wanted to pursue. The jazz program, which drew it's faculty from the great jazz musicians staffing Motown records, included trumpet artists Marcus Belgrave and Herbie Williams, saxophonists Sam Sanders and Donald Washington, bassists Ed Pickens and Ali Jackson, pianists Harold McKinney and Johnny Allen and drummers Jimmy Allen and "Pistol" Allen. At Oakland, Walt got first hand experience performing with Jazz greats Clark Terry, Thad Jones, Frank Foster, "Dangerous" Dan Turner, Phil Woods, Joe Farrell and John Clark.

It was also during this period that Walt began to record and tour with many local Detroit acts including Johnny Taylor, the Four Tops, Aretha Franklin, the Temptations, the Dramatics, Wild Cherry and the Brides of Funkenstein. He also co-led the jazz quintet, IMPACT, which hosted a legendary Detroit Sunday afternoon jam session and worked extensively throughout the mid-west region.

From 1979 through 1982, Walt served as staff arranger, trumpet soloist and vocalist at the Grand Hotel, on Mackinac Island, MI., It was there that he made his first contact with legendary jazz drummer great, J.C. Heard., who was so inspired by Walt's arranging ability that he hired him as music director for his newly formed Duke Ellington Repertory Orchestra, the J.C. Heard Orchestra. His apprenticeship with J.C. found Walt sharing the stage with one of his greatest idols, Dizzy Gillespie. In addition to Diz, Walt performed in small combo situations with Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown, Milt Hinton, George Shearing, Buddy Tate, Nat Pierce, Buddy DeFranco, Slim Galliard and Joe Bushkin.

Walt, also prolific as a composer (formal studies with Stanley Hollingsworth), served as composer in residence for the Detroit Dance Collective, the Acoustic Arts Ensemble and the Detroit Concert Choir. Additionally, Walt has served as Instructor of Jazz Trumpet, Arranging and Composition Studies at Oakland University (Rochester, MI) 1985-92, as well as the Center for Creative Studies (Detroit, MI) 1988-90. His numerous artistic awards include 1972 Best Trumpet (State of

Michigan Phi Mu Alpha), 1976-77 Arranger and Soloist awards (NAJE, IAJE), 1989-92 Best Trumpet and Best Composer awards (Metro-Times Annual Music Awards), and 1993 Jazz Hall of Fame (Metro-Times Annual Music Awards).

His true love of straight ahead Jazz inspired Walt in 1982 to form and co-lead a hard bop group, the Motor City Jazz Quintet, which in addition to performing at numerous clubs and concert venues, was a perennial favorite at the Detroit/Montreux Jazz Festival. For 10 years, from 1982 to 1992, the quintet performed original compositions and arrangements, always packed houses and rave reviews. It was during this time also that Walt created numerous arrangements for J.C. Heard and his Orchestra. After the untimely death of J.C. in 1988, Walt knew that he would have to move on if he was to maintain the energy level established through his association with Mr. Heard. This "moving on" meant New York City, the "Big Apple".

Establishing residency in New York in 1993, Walt quickly established musical affiliations with Barry Altschul, Kenny Drew Jr., Kirk Lightsey, Cecil McBee, Eddie Hendersen, David Scnitter, and Jimmy Madison. His first New York jazz group, Emergence, featured new compositions inspired by Walt's move to NYC. He soon was performing as an instrumentalist/soloist with Ray Santos and CAME, the Mingus Big Band, Wayne Andre, Nancy Banks Orchestra and the Jazz Composers Orchestra. His current musical activities include principal trumpet for the Billy Strayhorn Project, the Charles Tolliver Big Band, co-leader of the Jambalya Brass Band and musical director of George Gee's Make Believe Ballroom Orchestra and Jump Jivin' Wailers. In 2004 Walt co-produced a CD with legendary arranger/composer Frank Foster entitled "Settin' the Pace" featuring the George Gee Orchestra.

Also a lover of classical music as well, Walt is principal trumpet with the Metropolitan Brass Quintet and the Gotham Brass Quintet. He additionally has appeared with the Harlem Festival Orchestra and the Greater Allen Cathedral of New York Orchestra.

In 2001, Walt and two fellow musicians, Alex Harding (bari sax) and Gary Wittner (guitar) formed Trio WAG and were selected to present the music of Louis Armstrong as Jazz Ambassadors for the U.S. State Department and Kennedy Center. As Jazz Ambassadors, the trio found themselves serving as the first cultural exchange group in the Balkans since the onset on civil war in the region. The trio performed numerous concerts and workshop/clinics throughout Serbia, Montenegro and Slovenia. In 2003 they embarked on a second tour taking them to Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Japan.

One of Walt's main current and exciting project finds him working as musical director/soloist/composer with pianist and songstress Ms. Jo Thompson and the Detroit Jazz Jewels. Originally formed as a quartet they, appeared at all of the major cabaret/jazz venues in NYC, including the Tavern on the Green, the Supper Club, the Oak Room, Michael's Pub and Eighty Eights. In 1994 they were recipients of the Backstage Award for Best Instrumental/Vocal Group as well as the MAC award. In 2000, Walt and Jo decided to expand the sound to include the 13 member J.C. Heard Orchestra and have subsequently recorded two albums, "Slender, Tender and Tall" and "Forever Fabulous". They have performed to packed houses and rave reviews at the world famous Blue Note, Iridium and Birdland jazz clubs as well as the Lincoln Center and extensively throughout Japan.