

Jonathan Challoner: Among the Top Brass

by David Morrison

In one of life's fascinating little synchronicities, during the morning of the day I had scheduled to transcribe the recording of my interview with this month's subject, news broke of the passing of Uan Rasey (1921-2011). Unless you are a scholar of his instrument or a movie nut you may not know the name, but without knowing it you have surely heard him play. As first trumpeter with the MGM movie studio orchestra for around 25 years, Rasey contributed to the soundtracks of dozens of Hollywood classics, such as *West Side Story*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *My Fair Lady* and, taking solo spotlights, *Chinatown*.

Enjoying equal 'anonymity' within the crowd scene of an orchestra was the late Maurice Murphy (1935-2010). Described upon his death by Tom Service of UK broadsheet, *The Guardian*, as "an essential part of the soundtrack to your musical life, even if you don't realise it," Murphy was principal trumpeter of the London Symphony Orchestra from 1977 to 2007. Like Rasey, Murphy was a genius in his sphere, his horn featuring in the music for all six episodes of the third most successful movie franchise of all time (and, in the first three *Harry Potter* movies, the most successful). And, like Rasey, in terms of commercial visibility Murphy remains unknown, yet it was he above all other potentially influential trumpet players that first captured the musical imagination of a kid from Coombs.

"The first music that really caught my attention was film music, and most definitely

John Williams' scores, like *Star Wars*," begins Jonathan Challoner, who actually had the good fortune of meeting Murphy four years ago. ("It was a great experience," he says.)

At just 24-years old, Challoner, now based in Toronto, is widely regarded as one of the most promising exponents of the trumpet this country has seen in many a day. As the youngest member of John MacLeod's Rex Hotel Orchestra he won a Juno this year for Best Traditional Jazz Album for *Our First Set*. MacLeod describes his young band-mate as "probably the most impressive Canadian jazz trumpet player of his generation."

Lofty praise indeed, but when learning that the Kwalikum Secondary and Humber College graduate was one of five finalists (and the sole Canadian) in the biggest international jazz trumpet competition in the world in September, it's not difficult to understand why. Dedicated to the memory of a legendary New York brass teacher, the Carmine Caruso International Jazz Trumpet Solo Competition is held in Springfield, Missouri, and for budding professional trumpeters is a very big deal.

"It was a huge honour to be a part of it," beams Challoner, "and I met these four other trumpet players who are all on their own paths. It was extremely inspirational for new directions to take myself."



continued next page

New directions? As if this young man doesn't have enough directions to be following as it is! "I have my own band that I write for and do stuff with," he explains, in detailing the other projects he is involved in besides MacLeod's award winners. "I'm also the co-leader of the Heavyweights Brass Band. It's inspired by the music of New Orleans, and we play jazz and funk. That band has been my main focus for the last few months. We've been playing quite a lot and have got a lot of attention in Ontario, which we hope will spread nationwide in the coming months."

If widespread attention were not forthcoming for this fresh, exciting outfit, it would be a travesty, frankly. In July the 5-piece band released its debut CD, *Don't Bring Me Down*, featuring funk-tastic original material alongside swinging, brass-propelled interpretations of pop hits by such as Lady Gaga, Michael Jackson and Beyoncé. An unmistakably Big Easy-spiced musical gumbo, with occasional soul and hip-hop flourishes adding further contemporary flavours, *Don't Bring Me Down* is already a considerable hit on national jazz radio, with the pop potential to cross over to the mainstream. One of the Heavyweights' highest profile gigs to date takes place in Toronto on November 17, where they open for New Orleans musician, Trombone Shorty, who at just one year older than Challoner has already worked with U2, Eric Clapton, Dr. John and Lenny Kravitz to name a few.

Apart from the Heavyweights and his work with MacLeod, Challoner also keeps his hand in with Powell River-born jazz legend, Don Thompson; fast-rising, Toronto-based Brazilian singer, Alina Morales, and the 7-piece funk outfit, KC Roberts & the Live Revolution. That's six projects and counting, if you're losing track.

On top of all of this, as part of the Gibson-Baldwin GRAMMY Jazz Ensemble, Challoner performed at the GRAMMYs even before attending Humber College. "I was in high school," he explains, "and it was thanks to the teachers and mentors I had growing up on the Island – everyone from my trumpet teacher to my high school music teachers, to people like Ingrid Jensen, the amazing trumpet player from Nanaimo. She helped me audition for some of these programs for young musicians in the States, and it sort of turned into the GRAMMYs thing. It was my first taste of a professional life and was fun, but the really good thing about it was I got to meet people my age who wanted to do exactly the same thing."

Apart from the seemingly unlikely influence of Maurice Murphy, Challoner is on record citing more obvious musical giants as crucial to his progression as a young musician. He describes his discovery of Duke Ellington's early works as a time "full of magic and wonder," and how "a million emotions burst out of every sound, every chord and every solo." Of Clark Terry's playing, Challoner poetically observes it as possessing "the same kind of humanity and feeling a great Shakespearean actor could emote."

If based solely on these words, Challoner is clearly a musician with the ability to delve into the very soul of musical creation, to profoundly feel the emotional punch of music with a deeper understanding than most – whether

musician, or otherwise. When listening to his instinctive, silky playing, the skills so highly rated by John MacLeod, among many, certainly reflect this. Challoner is simply as natural a musician as it is possible to be, delivering his music to the listener with as much soulful expression as brilliant technique, regardless of the sonic setting.

Considering Challoner's main inspiration was a musician remembered principally for soundtrack work, it is sweet that another of life's fascinating little synchronicities has a part to play in his own story. When relating his love of Duke Ellington's music in the piece of writing from which the above quotes are taken, Challoner also proclaimed the Duke's body of work as "a soundtrack to life, with ups and downs, happiness and sadness, jovial playfulness and tight-lipped seriousness." Wouldn't it be cool if one day in the future a young musician looked back at the discography of Jonathan Challoner and thought the very same thing?

"So much of what we do is ephemeral and quickly forgotten, even by ourselves, so it's gratifying to have something you have done linger in people's memories." ~ John Williams, composer of the Star Wars soundtracks

Hear and read more at: www.myspace.com/jonchalloner, www.heavyweightsbrassband.com and www.johnsjazz.ca

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Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 211, Bowser

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