

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANK REHAK

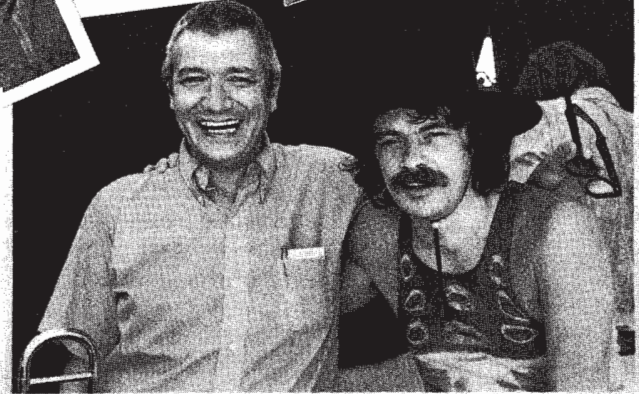
Frank Rehak, 1979.
(Photo by Helen Brush.)



Carl Fontana
and Frank
Rehak.



Frank and Sandra Rehak,
December 1978. (Photo by
Helen Brush.)



Frank Rehak. (Photo by Helen Brush.)

Frank Rehak and
Phil Woods.

by Tom Everett

Editor: The following interview was conducted in 1984 and published in *Cadence* magazine. The original article has been condensed for this publication.

Tell me a little about your background before settling in New York City.

Well, I was actually born in New York, so it's kind of the reverse. I was in New York and then went on the road. I was born in Brooklyn in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section on July 7, 1926. So that makes me 56 years old, although I feel a lot younger than that. I started playing cello and piano when I was about six years old.

Did you take lessons?

I started studying piano when I was about eight. I was naturally attracted to playing the piano, and by the time I was

ten years old, I had no doubt about what I was going to do with my life; I was going to be a musician. You know how kids grow up and say, "Well, I'll be a fire chief;" or I'll be this or that. I never had any doubt about being a musician, from the time I was nine or ten years old. I studied piano for about six years and played cello for several years. I became a pretty good baritone horn player. I hated jazz music...

What was the first jazz you heard?

Well, the first jazz that I heard (that I listened to), is an interesting story. I took up trombone when I was in the Navy, because if I didn't I was going to be loading ammunition on an aircraft carrier. I figured that this was not part of my life-style. So I told our chief in the Navy that I could play trombone—I could play baritone horn, so I could at least play

bugle calls on the trombone. I found out one morning that if I didn't become an instant trombone player, I'd be loading ammunition starting that day (laughter). So that afternoon, I played my first job on the trombone. All I could play were the notes in first position. It was a very funny scene, because we were a thousand miles out at sea and nobody could care less whether I could play trombone or not. We were all in the Navy, and it was during a war. I had a good lip from playing baritone horn, but—good field, no hit, you know (laughter); no slide, I didn't know what the slide was all about, so I had to learn; I'm still working on it 35 years later.

Who were the first jazz people you heard that you wanted to emulate?

Well, shortly after I took up trombone, I heard Bill Harris playing *Caldonia*. It was

the first time I heard trombone. I thought it was exciting, and it sparked something within me. I also began listening to Lawrence Brown, who I thought was a phenomenal trombone player. I still do. . .

Didn't Tommy Dorsey turn you on?

Not particularly. I listened to him in the early days of my playing, when I went through a whole phase of listening to some of the real old-time guys. Mind you, this was during the war and I was overseas, so I didn't have access to a great big raft of records. Although I did manage to get close to a young lady who owned the only jazz record store in Honolulu, so I could listen to all the jazz music that was available at that time. The first jazz record that I ever tried to actually emulate was a thing called *I'm Confessin'* by J. C. Higgenbotham.

It was a great old record—a 12-inch 78. This was all before tape machines, 33 1/3 records, and stereo. So I heard this record of *I'm Confessin'* and copied it off. One day I was playing in this big band, and you know we used to play a medley every once in a while. Guys would play some jazz choruses, so I said, "I want to play a tune." They said, "Sit down, you can't play jazz." I said, "Yes, I can!" "Okay, what do you want to play?" I said, *I'm Confessin'*. So I stood up and played *I'm Confessin'*.

Then I played this great chorus. I still remember parts of it. They looked at me with their mouths open and said, "Man, we didn't know you could play jazz." So there I was, a jazz player. The only tune I could play was *I'm Confessin'*, and I played it exactly the same every time. People began to get suspicious, so I had to start changing some of the notes around. I started fishing around and figuring out different notes to play instead of the original things.

I put the record on and tried to play a little bit different than J. C. did. I eventually learned how to play jazz mostly by doing stuff like that. The second tune I learned was *Blue Skies* and then a whole series of early tunes. Now, the first time I heard any bebop was a different situation. By that time, I had heard Jack Teagarden, Lawrence Brown, Bill Harris, J.C. Higgenbotham. . .

Is this still the mid-40s?

Early '40s, and I was still in the Navy. We were in Hawaii, and one night some

of the guys in the band came in with this record of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. They said, "Man, you've gotta listen to this—this is the new music, this is it. Fabulous stuff." So they put it on, and it was the most god-awful stuff I had ever heard in my life. I couldn't believe it; the trumpet player was hitting clams all over the place, and the alto player was out of tune. I said, "You guys are crazy; this is the worst," and they said, "No, listen to it again." They had me practically tied down to the chair, listening to this record of *Now's The Time* and *Billie's Bounce*, which by today's standards is almost elevator music.

Anyway, in those days, that was revolutionary stuff. I finally got so angry, just sitting there listening to this thing over and over, hearing those guys make mistakes, that I took the record (an old 78) and broke it over my knee. It went into about 18 pieces, and I almost got lynched. Now, mind you, this was before tape recorders, so the only way I could repair the damage was to take this record and put it back together like a jigsaw puzzle . . . and then tape up all of one side of it, flip it over like a flapjack, get it on the turntable so we could tape it on an old Wollensak wire recorder. We taped it with all the clicks from the broken places on the record, and then took the tape off and did the same thing on the other side.

So we had this dilapidated version of *Now's The Time* and *Billie's Bounce*, that we played every time we went anywhere. It took all of three weeks, I guess, before I started liking it. It was my first real experience with keeping my ears open. It was a real lesson for me because, of course, the stuff that I detested had

something new, a portent of something new, so to speak. So I've always thought about that incident when I say, "Well, this guy sounds terrible." I'll always give anything a second or a third listen, because you never know how far your ears can be opened up or how closed they are.

How'd you make the jump from a military trombonist to a professional trombonist?

Well, during the war there were a bunch of bands in Hawaii, one called the Hellcats, which was mostly a Jimmy Lunceford type. . .

These bands were basically to entertain the troops?

Sure. Guys were coming in and out of Hawaii on the way to Guadalcanal on ships or eventually to Japan and what-not. There were a lot of big Army and Navy bases there. I began fiddling around with jazz and learning more about it, simply by doing it every day. There were no educational tools in those days and no books that said use this scale for this situation or anything like that. I just listened a lot and tried to imitate Ben Webster because I loved the way he played. I tried to play trombone choruses the way he did on sax. I also imitated Lester Young and several other people. I eventually got a job playing with a sextet playing six nights a week all over the island. It was a golden opportunity for me to just stretch out and learn how to play jazz. Along with my classical training on the other instruments, it gave me a pretty well-rounded base to become a professional.



Frank Rehak, Billy Watrous, Joe Ellis (musician-dentist), Milt Hinton (the judge) at Gibson Jazz Party.

Did anyone else in that band go on to play professionally?

There was one other fellow, Irwin Price, who is now with the New York Philharmonic. He helped me a lot in the early days. I don't think that any of the other players made music their career. There was one fellow by the name of Phil Vessley, an alto player who worked around Chicago. Nobody ever became famous, certainly. John McDade was in that band—trombone players all know him; he was in that band with me the day I took up trombone, so he can verify all of that crazy stuff. . . .

When was the transition to professional player?

The first gig outside the Navy was very funny because, as I was telling you earlier, I began writing to various people. There's the town of Patchogue which had a hotel with a cocktail lounge. I heard about a group that played there on weekends, supposedly with some pretty good jazz players. I went down one night with my valve trombone; it was great to be able to play both instruments. When I asked to sit in with this group, they said "Oh no, the manager doesn't let anyone. . ." They didn't know me at that time, so I was just trying to convince them by saying "Oh yeah, I know *Grooving' High*. I know this tune and that tune," trying to use the language to gain entrance to sit in.

I kept at it all night, but the tenor player would not let me sit in; he was the leader. Finally, at the beginning of the last set, I got to the piano player and said, "Please, I've been sitting here all night; you've got to let me just sit in on one tune." So, as luck would have it, he convinced the tenor player. So I sat in on one tune, and the manager walked in as I was playing. About 45 minutes later, he had fired the tenor player and hired me to be the leader of the band (laughter). Anyway, that was my first professional job. I worked there every Friday and Saturday for a few weeks.

Had you heard J.J. by this time?

No, I hadn't.

Who was the most advanced trombonist you had heard?

Bill Harris was still tops; this was 1946. I went to a place called Burden Lake up

near Albany with a band that consisted of four trombones, trumpet, sax, and four rhythm. I was playing both valve and slide trombone, and we were working, believe it or not, for 13 bucks a week plus room and board. Six nights a week, eight hours a night, you know. It was great; Art Mooney's band came through, which was not a particularly good band; they wouldn't even let us take the night off, so we played opposite them. Art heard me and asked me to come out to California with him, to go to the Hollywood Palladium; they were going to be there in about six weeks.

Just listening to that other band, I couldn't. Even then I couldn't hack it, singing for a living didn't make it for me. So I declined, but my other job folded about two weeks later. Art called from Salt Lake City on their way to California and he said, "Come on out, I want you to join the band if you're not working." And I said yes. You know, the Hollywood Palladium, and being without a job changed things considerably. I didn't know anything about union scale or first-class traveling, or any of that kind of stuff, so I rode a coach for three days out to Salt Lake City with my horn between my knees, trying not to go to sleep so no one would steal my horn.

I got to Salt Lake City, and I found out that I wasn't hired, but was auditioning for the job. I was sick when I heard that and figured that I had to get the job. I wasn't about to turn around and go back to New York. There were four guys who auditioned: Three were from California, and me. There was one chair open, and I ended up getting it. It was either luck or I don't know what—somebody was looking out for me, and I got the job, so I went to the Hollywood Palladium with Art. I spent about six weeks there and met a lot of the Hollywood guys.

Did you hear Jimmy Knepper out there? Jimmy was out there about that time.

He probably was, but I don't think I heard him. I don't recall all the names I heard; there were some great players and there was lots of musical activity. I remember there was a little place right off Hollywood and Vine, where Ben Webster, Freddy Otis, a piano player, and Benny Carter were playing. I used to go there every night as soon as the Hollywood Palladium job was over and sit in.

What was the atmosphere out on the coast at this time, being a newcomer from the East; were you just accepted basically on your musicianship?

Oh, yeah; for me it was fabulous. I became really good friends with Ben Webster and Benny Carter. In fact to this day we still send each other regards through friends; we haven't seen each other in years, but I have friends who tell me, "Oh, Benny Carter says to say hello." And Ben Webster, you know, was such a giant. He used to just pick me up by one hand; I used to call him "the beast." He was a wonderful player. So all of those things were happening around that time. I got back to New York and I was working the Meadowbrook with Art Mooney in 1949. Gene Krupa had been looking for a trombone player.

Was that to replace Rosolino?

No, he had Frank and Urbie and he was looking for somebody else—I forget who left. Anyway, he was auditioning guys for about two weeks. I felt like Gene Krupa's band was way above my head; playing with Art Mooney's band was one thing, where you sang half the night, did funny antics, wore funny green jackets, but to play with a jazz band like Krupa's? Don Fagerquist and Roy Eldridge were on the band, and some really good jazz players.

Was Mulligan writing for the band?

Gerry was writing some of the stuff. I don't recall who else, but anyway, it was a really top-notch band. I was a little nervous to even audition for the band. A guy named Al Stewart, a trumpet player in New York, finagled me into coming down to a rehearsal one day; we were walking down the street, and he said, "Listen, I have to stop in Nola's for a minute, come on up with me." I happened to have my horn with me. We walked into this studio, and he said, "Gene, here's the guy I've been telling you about." And he stuck me in there and closed the door. Gene said, "Great, kid get your horn out," and there I was.

What did the audition consist of? Was it reading the book, or just playing with Krupa?

No, the band was rehearsing, and I had to sit in with the band. He had auditioned about 30 guys already, and they were leaving town that afternoon to go to Allentown, Pennsylvania. So that was my

first meeting with Frank and Urbie. It was very funny because—well, Urbie wasn't there that day, but Frank Rosolino was, and Gene asked me to play some stuff. I played some jazz, and he said, "Okay, the bus is leaving at 2:00." I said, "I can't go anywhere; I have a job at the Meadowbrook," and he said, "Well, kid, if you want this job, you'd better get somebody to cover you tonight, and get your stuff together," so I did. And I got Chauncey Welsh to cover for me over at the Meadowbrook for a couple of weeks. I gave notice via Chauncey, and two or three hours later I was on the bus, going to Allentown with Frank Rosolino and company. And it was a wild experience, you know, tremendous.

Must have been crazy—Frank was crazy, wasn't he?

Oh, he was nice crazy—wonderful. We became the best of friends. We were inseparable—we would hit every club everywhere we went, every one-nighter no matter whether the club was open or not. Every night Frank and I would be out playing at some joint after our regular job. I remember one night sitting by the side of the railroad tracks, with some guy from Peoria, Illinois, holding a cymbal and a drumstick, whacking away on this thing, God knows what we were doing there, but Frank and I had our horns out and were playing.

I had a car that I bought right after I joined that band, so Frank and I traveled around and just had one heck of a great time; it was marvelous playing with him. Urbie, Frank and I worked really well together as a team, as you probably can imagine. We thought alike musically, and all liked to play. It was just a really compatible situation. I remember there were times when we would trade the book around, and then, it got to the point where we knew the book so well, that we wouldn't set up any music stands.

We wouldn't take the books out, and Gene would say, "247, 382, 485," and Urbie would say, "Okay, why don't you play first," and we wouldn't even have any music out. Gene would flip out. He'd say, "You gotta look like you're working for a living. You guys sit there with your legs crossed and you're playing these parts!" He couldn't fault us because we were playing them perfectly. So we kept music stands in front of us but never opened the

book. We all learned a lot from each other; I certainly learned a lot from those two. They were fabulous trombone players; I think it was one of the high points of my musical career as far as playing with a trombone section—you couldn't beat it.

You've played with some fine sections; Jim Dahl, Jimmy Cleveland, and Frank Rehak were almost a house section for bands in New York and recording sessions—you guys worked so well together, plus you were kind of foils for each other; there was a nice style contrast between the three of you.

Yeah. I enjoyed playing with that section, too. We did a lot of stuff with Johnny Richards, and we did an album together with Gene Quill. It was always fun playing with Jimmy Cleveland. Trombone players are just naturally nice guys, I guess—we always got along so well and had fun on and off the stand and became great personal friends. I still see Cleveland when I get out to California.

Was Woody the next big band you went with?

Let's see; from Gene Krupa I went with Jimmy Dorsey. By then it was 1950. I stayed with Jimmy for almost three years. I quit the band the first night because they went overtime, and I missed my train out to Long Island. Jimmy was kind of juiced out by the end of the night and he wouldn't stop playing. So I said, "I'm not going to work for a leader that's a juice bug; it's a real fight, you never know where you are. So I gave my notice the very first night on the band. He gave me a raise the next day, and I ended up staying on for about three years. That band was a different kind of band; it wasn't a jazz band, but if you recall, Tommy and Jimmy were not on the best of terms at that time, and so my instructions from Jimmy were, "Anything you can do to make Tommy mad," he said, "go ahead and do it. If you can play something that's so wild that he can't play it, I'll love you for it."

So, if you remember, in those days there were air checks every night. You could hear Tommy Dorsey from the Chase Hotel, so-and-so from the Catalina Island, and another band from the New Yorker, and all that. So we'd get on these radio shows and Jimmy would just cut me

loose and let me do whatever I wanted as far as solo stuff, so I had lots of solos to play, and I could do all the pyrotechnics I wanted. And I would get a call from Tommy about every three or four months. He'd call up and say, "What are you playing with that guy for? Why don't you come with my band?" And I'd say, "Why would I want to come with your band?"

You would never play with his band?!

I said, "I'll never get anything to play, and I'll never make any money. Jimmy's paying me well, and I enjoy working with him, and I'm playing all I want." He said, "But you'd be getting a lesson from me every time I picked up my horn." And I said, "Well, that's probably true, but, you know (not in so many words), who needs a lesson from you?" So I would use that, of course, against Jimmy; I'd go down and I'd say, "Jimmy, guess what: the old grey fox called me last night," and he'd say, "Oh, man, how much is it going to cost this time?" And I'd say, "You better tack on another \$25," or whatever I thought he'd go for. And so I kept getting raises. . .

Beautiful!

So Jimmy and I had a great relationship. He was a very sick guy as far as booze went. I drove his car for him—he used to have a new Cadillac all the time. I drove his car and took care of him because he liked to drink. He'd get messed up by the end of the night, so somebody had to make sure he got home all right and put him to bed. But he was a guy that loved music, loved to play, and it was a shame that he was in that kind of shape. I enjoyed working with him. I thought he was a terrific guy and I always thought of him as a good musician. I left his band, though, to go with Woody. Not really to go with Woody; I left his band to go to New York.

Around that time, I started dabbling with heroin. I told you that story about Patti Page. I was on Jimmy Dorsey's band when that record was made (*How Much Is That Doggy In The Window?*). Nick Travis and I both left the band the same night in Austin, Texas. On the way back to New York we started talking about getting a little snort of heroin, and having a little taste to relax us. Needless to say, the minute we hit the Lincoln Tunnel, we were on our way over to the connection. . .



Al Grey, Trummy Young, Bill Watrous, Frank Rehak, Carl Fontana and Slide Hampton at the Gibson Jazz Party.

Were most of the guys in the band into activities like this?

Not in Jimmy's band. There might have been a couple of guys who smoked pot, but Jimmy's band was pretty much a family band; there were about eight wives traveling with the band, so there was not much opportunity to get too wild. . .

Did you have a specific goal in going back to New York; did you want to get into studio work?

Yeah, I didn't have anything set, but I knew that if I got back to New York I could get work; we had been working in and out of New York for quite a long time and people said, "Listen, if you settle down here, you could probably get some recording dates." So I did. For a while everything went quite well; I began to get some recording dates, but I was dabbling with heroin all along the way. Eventually everything fell apart for me. By 1955-56, nobody would touch me with a ten-foot pole; they knew I was a junkie.

You were still playing a lot of jazz though.

Yeah, but not that much. It was already slowing down.

How did you explain that in 1957 you got the New Star award from *Downbeat*?

Well, I'll tell you. In 1955, I took about nine months off, and became a plumber. I had been arrested a couple of times by then; I stopped everything. . .

Just cold turkey?

I stopped playing; I stopped everything.

Did you get any help?

No, I went home, and kicked for a couple of weeks at my folks' house. I just looked around for a job that had nothing to do with music; I didn't know anything but music, since that's all I had done, so I became a plumber's helper. I learned that whole business. I spent about nine months doing that and learned pretty much the whole business, to the point where I could go in and install a whole plumbing system by myself.

I stayed away from all kinds of drugs and felt pretty good about being able to do that. I came back to New York one night and went into Charlie's tavern, the old place I remember fondly. That was on 7th Avenue, between 51st and 52nd Street. Anyway, I went in there and there was a fist fight going on. A fellow named Al Robertson, a trombone player, got hit in the face. His teeth were loose and all that; he was supposed to work at Birdland with Eddie Grady and the Commanders. Eddie was a drummer, and his band had four trombones in it; it wasn't exactly a jazz band, but somehow they got a job at Birdland.

So this fellow Al asked me to go down and sit in with them. I said, "I don't have a horn, I don't have a mouthpiece, I haven't played in nine months;" he said, "Man, it's just playing third trombone; you can do it." Anyway, I finally went down and played the job—this was on a Friday night. Saturday night, I did the job again. Incidentally, Friday night, right

after the first set, a bunch of my old friends came down; they said, "Oh, man, you're back in business, come on up with us, we'll turn you on." I said, "I'll go with you, but I'm done with that stuff forever." So we went over to the Alvin Hotel right across the street, and they threw me a bag of stuff. I said, "I don't want it. If you give it to me I'm going to throw it down the toilet."

They said, "Ho-ho-ho, that'll be the day." "Well, this is the day." I picked it up and threw it down the toilet. I remember flushing this bag, and this guy had his arm down the toilet, trying to retrieve a ten-dollar bag of heroin or something that he'd given me. So I walked out feeling like I had the world licked; if I could do that, I could do anything. I went back and finished out the weekend at Birdland. By the end of the weekend, that story had circulated around town, in certain circles, that this guy's really clean; he's really straight, they gave him some stuff and he wouldn't take it. The upshot was that by Sunday night, somebody had called me for a record date on Wednesday, and somebody else had called me for a record date on Friday, and my stock was going back up. Monday morning came and I had finished the job at Birdland at four in the morning and wasn't about to go out to Long Island to be a plumber again; I had just finished three nights in the middle of New York City, at the world's greatest jazz club. So I never called the plumbing company back!

I think Quincy Jones called me about two or three weeks later and said, "Dizzy's taking a band around the world. Do you want to come along?" I said, "Of course!"—who could say no to that? So that was my next trip—1956, I joined Dizzy's band, and we went straight from New York to Abadan, Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and points east. We spent several months on that trip, came back to New York, spent about a week playing at Birdland and went straight to South America. We picked up Lalo Schiffrin down there and had a marvelous trip; it was the most exciting band I'd ever been on, just full of fire every night. Dizzy was in top shape, and it was just a fabulous experience.

Was Melba Liston on that band?

Melba was on the band.

Did she take most of the solos, or did you split them?

Oh, no, I played most of the solos, and she played a few.

Was Al Grey in that band, too?

No, Rod Levitt was the other trombone player.

Was he writing for the band at that time?

I think he wrote one or two tunes. Melba was writing for the band. So were Quincy and Ernie Wilkins; also Benny Golson; Phil Woods and Marty Flacks were also on the band.

Lee Morgan?

Lee Morgan came on the band shortly after that, when we went to South America. Joe Gordon, Evie Perry, Warwick, Charlie Persip, Nelson Boyd, and Walter Davis, Jr. were also on the band.

Did you or Phil or Joe receive any reverse discrimination, being the only whites in a black band?

We had the funniest experience. Nobody ever said a word about any kind of discrimination at all. In fact we never even thought about it until we came back to the United States. We were going through customs and the reporters were there. I was wearing a whole Arab outfit that I'd picked up in Damascus. The reporters didn't care about the Arab outfit; they only wanted to know what it was like to play with a black band. And I said, "Oh, we didn't even realize it." It was so silly. It was the first indication that there was any color deal going on at all. It was just one big band that was having a great time. I could go on for hours about that trip. It was a fabulous education, seeing all of those places, seeing how people lived, seeing how poor some of them were and how rich others were.

Were people ready for the music; were they prepared for big band bebop?

In Abadan, Iran, people had traveled on camelback for two weeks to come and hear the concert. I guess they heard it on shortwave radio; people came from all over the place—from across the Russian border. It was unbelievable; we played for crowds that went berserk. You've seen the Beatles riots and Frank Sinatra at the

Paramount, stuff like that, where people were trampling each other to get up to see the band.

Did everybody realize that it was going to be a short-lived band? Did you know when you joined it that it probably wouldn't survive as an on-going band after the tour?

I don't know if we thought that much about it. I didn't plan on staying with it for a long time myself, but an aggregation like that had so many stars that it was almost impossible to keep it together in this country because you'd be going to Youngstown and Zanesville and places



Dizzy Gillespie, Frank Rehak, Oakland, California, June, 1976.

not nearly as interesting as Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon. Part of the excitement was visiting new countries and having mobs go insane over the music. People would just scream and faint—flat on their back.

Stretcherbearers would come and carry them out, and you'd say, "Okay, man, I'm going to get nine people with this one." You'd stand up to blow, and have contests to see how many people we could knock out. Of course, Dizzy could knock out more than any of us, so we never stood a chance. But it was an exhilarating experience, probably one of the greatest musical highs I ever had.

Were you still clean at this time?

Yeah, pretty much; you know, I smoked a little grass here and there, but I wasn't using any heroin then. So I came back, and within a couple of weeks, I was asked to join the staff of CBS, and I went on staff there for a few years, and did the Garry Moore Show and the Ed Sullivan show...

That was well-paying work, but was it the most rewarding work?

Well, the Garry Moore show was fun to do.

Who was the leader?

A fellow named Irwin Kostly who's out in California now. He's a very fine musician. I just saw him a short time ago, as a matter of fact. We listened to old Garry Moore tapes. That's what old people do, you know. We were playing tapes that he hadn't heard in 25 years. They were brittle, so he ran them through this wonderful machine. About every hundred feet the tape would crack, and fall to the floor, and we'd say, "Well, we'll never hear that one again!"

By the end of the night, we had a big pile of tape on the floor, all old Garry Moore Show tapes. We had a good band there, too; Jimmy Nottingham, Hal McKusick, Trigger Alpert, Hank Jones, and Chuck Wayne; some fine players. Also Wayne Andre—in fact, I think that was his first big-time show. I went from there to a Broadway show, where I had a part on stage; Hank Jones, Ernie Furtado, and I. It was called "Copper and Brass." We rehearsed for months and months with Nancy Walker and Joan Blondell.

All the musicians had acting speaking parts. So we were all sitting in Lindy's opening night, waiting for the reviews. At two a.m. they came out—a big headline said "Copper and Brass" more like "Zinc and Lead." I'll never forget that headline, so that was the end of the acting and career. All this time I was doing all kinds of record dates too. That show must have been in 1957, because we stopped the show one afternoon, and they presented me with the *Downbeat* Award.

Did getting that *Downbeat* New Star award help you?

I'm sure that it did. I don't think that my job quotient improved a great deal the following week or anything like that, but that year in particular I was doing more jazz dates...

Were you still going to sessions, too, just jam sessions?

Not too many, because I was busy most of the time. There were more and more dates of all types happening. By 1958, I was finding myself on three or four record dates a day, almost every day. I remember one period when I went for nine months

without a day off—seven days a week, I was doing at least three dates a day, sometimes five dates. There were some funny instances; I can remember doing a date with Michel Legrand. . .

Michel Legrand's jazz album with Miles?

Yeah. We started the date at midnight, and Billy Byers and I, and I think Cleve had been on four dates already that day. This was the fifth date of the day. We walked in—I'll never forget it—about ten till midnight and looked at this first trombone part. I said, "Hey, Billy, who is this guy?" Look at this music he wrote." We looked at it and made a quick exit down to the Bank Cafe and had a double scotch each, then came back and sat down. I said, "Pardon me, Mr. Legrand, but are you sure this is what you want from the trombones? This stuff is impossible to play." He said, "Yes, I know; that's why we hired you!" He said it so nicely that I said, "Okay." So we split that whole part up; I don't know if you can tell it on the record but, it was terrific. One tune, *Rosetta*, was taped at about two in the morning. I remember looking at those double B-flats, saying, "I hope we get through this." But it was fun to do, a real challenge. Then there was a whole series of dates I did with Miles and Gil Evans.

Did Miles actually hire you, or was it Evans?

Well, Gil called me for the first album, which was *Miles Ahead*, or *Miles Plus 19*; it's known by various names. Gil called me for that. I don't know how we first became acquainted, but I always regarded him as a teacher, you know. Every time I talk with him or I play for him or with him it's like taking a lesson. I did that album first, and I walked out of the studio and said, "Boy, this is something really new." I was really impressed by the music—and you have to realize that you're doing *Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should* and *In My Merry Oldsmobile* on dates that make your livelihood.

So when you walk into something like that and, boy, it's so refreshing; everything that you wanted to be when you were a kid. "This is what music is all about." So I walked out of that first date, and knew that we had something new by the tail; it was such a great sound. He called me to do *Porgy And Bess* again. Of course I was very eager to do it. Then, he called me to do *Sketches of Spain* on the third album in that series. I was booked up to my ears with rock and roll dates and commercial stuff.

You can't just call up a contractor and say, "You know that date we have next Tuesday that I took? I can't take it, get somebody else," because you're done with that contractor, or you're dead with him at least for the year, or until you can make it up to him. So all of the dates to *Sketches of Spain* were booked up; I was already

booked for something else, and I could make an hour of one, and an hour and a half of another one. I told Gil, "Listen, I can do an hour of this one and an hour and a half of the next one."

He said, "I can't do it that way; I'll just have to get somebody else." I said, "Well, it'd just be too expensive for me to take off, as much as I want to do it." So along about 3 o'clock in the morning I got a call from this voice saying, "Hey, mother, what are you doing to me?" It was Miles; we had gotten along very well; I said, "Man, there's no way I can do these dates." He said, "Listen, I'll give you double money, I'll give you whatever you need." I said, "It's not even that; I'm committed to some other dates, and I'm booked for them, and there's nothing I can do—it would be bad for me to cancel out on them."

And we haggled for about 15 minutes, and he called me several different names, but there was nothing I could do; it was just one of those things. So he said, "Well, when are you free?" I said, "I'm free from two to five on Tuesday, and six in the morning until nine on Thursday," and I think Sunday morning was one date, and so he said, "I'll get back to you in the morning." This was like 3:30 in the morning by now. About 7:00 Teo Macero called me up and said, "What have you got on Miles Davis? He just called me and he wants to change all these dates around. He flatly refuses to do the album unless you're on it." I said, "Terrific!"

You were playing lead on the date?

Yeah, I was playing most of the lead. But you know, Gil would write things for players. He never wrote for a first trombone; he wrote for people like Johnny Coles, Ernie Royal, Gil Bennett, Cleveland, or whoever was doing the date. Duke used to do the same thing. Anyway, they changed all these dates around so that I could do them. Teo said, "Man, I've got 30 guys here; I've got the engineer, I've got the studio," you know, he was a little bit upset, but I ended up doing *Sketches of Spain*. I was never so happy as when I walked out of the studio and finished that album, because if I had missed that, I would have hung up my horn. I would have been so mad that I didn't do it, because it became a classic album; I still get a kick out of listening to it.



Frank Rehak, John Coltrane and Miles Davis at CBS. (Photo by Bill Spilka.)

You were one of the few trombone players after J.J. that Miles used in a small group; I guess there's that one recording out with Bob Dorough called *Blue Christmas* that you play on; did you play much in a small group with Miles?

Not a lot, but Miles and I and a rhythm section were part of Gil Evans' big band—a small group within the band. It was called the Seven Lively Artists, or something like that.

Did you rehearse much with Miles, or did you just go and do it?

We rehearsed, but not a lot.

Where would you rehearse—in a studio or at Miles' place?

Usually at the studio. But I spent quite a bit of time with Miles and Gil. I was married to Gerrie Gray at the time, and she was good friends with Miles. In fact, she was Miles' wife's best friend, so the four of us used to spend time together. There was always something great going on at his house, because he loved to cook and entertain.

For trombone players, that *Roost date*, *Three Bones and A Quill*, with Gene Quill, Jimmy Dahl, Jimmy Cleveland, and yourself is kind of a classic for trombone players; it was just a wonderful date. How did that come about—three trombones, sax and rhythm is kind of an unusual combination for a date. Whose idea was it?

I think it was Johnny Richards' idea . . .

Because you were all playing with the band?

Yeah, we were all in his band at the time.

They used to feature the bones, like in *Cimarron*, that one thing, the three bones just played with rhythm.

I'm not really certain how it came about, but we were certainly all together all the time. I loved to play with Gene Quill. He was a great saxophone player. I understand he's in bad shape now. I think that Johnny Richards was the guy who gave us the idea to do that album, but I don't remember a great deal about how it actually came about.

Well, this takes us to the end of the '50s, and you were still playing in New York through the '60s, but not much was heard of you, certainly not on records. What was happening?

Well, I was in the studios for a while, and then I opened a music store around 1961. I opened a music store at 53rd Street and Broadway called Music Unlimited. And I turned right around and began using heroin again, so my decline was pretty swift. It didn't take long for word to get around again that I was messing up, and I lost my job at CBS. . .

Because of the talk, or were you not showing up for dates?

Well, a combination of things.

How was your playing?

Well, when you use heroin, playing is totally secondary; your connection becomes your dearest friend, and your horn becomes just another way to get a few bucks even if you have to hock it. It's not a very pleasant thing. Your whole life revolves around getting your next fix. And that's what happened to me; it didn't happen in one day, but in a period of about a year, I became totally undependable. People would rather hire a dependable guy that they knew was going to show up.

You ended up playing some Broadway shows, too, didn't you?

I did some Broadway shows, and a lot of different stuff. I was still doing some recording, but in general, my life was starting to take a turn downhill again. By 1963, I was employable, but not doing well at all. I started just falling apart again. By 1969, I was on my last legs. I would borrow a horn to play a job. I was selling newspapers on a delivery route.

It was in 1969 on tour with Woody Herman that he tried to send you off to Synanon.

Yeah.

You have been at Synanon from 1969 until when?

I'm still there.

Why don't you talk about what did Synanon do for you?

Well, in 1969, I was out on tour with Woody and Dionne Warwick. I kept getting just worse and worse, I was telling

somebody the other day, about this trumpet player in New York who got me this opportunity to go out with Woody Herman; I was in such bad shape that I had to borrow a pair of shoes from him. A couple of weeks ago, I sent him a pair of fine leather boots from Texas. This is like 15 years later. I just got a letter from him saying that he couldn't believe that he got these boots. I said, "Well, I owe you a pair of shoes, so here's a pair of boots."

So anyway, I was just getting totally ridiculous, to the point where my friend Ira Nepus, the other trombone player in the band, was putting my clothes on for me, tying my tie, putting my jacket on, and propping me up in the chair. . . Oh, I could barely play. As long as I sat down, I could move the slide, but I was just getting worse and worse by the minute. It was obvious that I was not long for this world; I weighed 120 or 125, and I was a wreck. One night I just collapsed on the bandstand and fell off my chair and I was lying on the ground.

I don't recall the exact words she said, but Dionne said something about there being a lot of garbage on the bandstand, and why don't we get rid of some of it. She was pointing at me, and I realized that something was radically wrong with me that I had gone through this whole procedure once before and had beat it, and had become wellknown and wealthy and all that. Yet here I was in the same position again. I talked with Woody, and he said, "Well, I can't carry a dead man on the band. You'll have to get yourself together; you have to go to Synanon, or I'm going to have to leave you here—I can't take you with me anymore." So he helped me get to Synanon that night, in fact, right after work that night. He had a couple of guys take me out to the airport, and Ira Nepus called his father, who was affiliated with Synanon in Santa Monica, California.

They picked me up, put me on the plane, and the father picked me up. There were a series of wild circumstances surrounding that. I got so out of my mind on the plane that I was circling around at about 80,000 feet and the plane had already landed. Poor old Nepus, the father, didn't know where I was. I finally emerged from the plane, and I looked like some kind of a gorilla or something. I was on all fours and babbling and frothing at the mouth, I was just crazy. It caused a

scene at the airport and I had the cops after me. He finally got me to the car.

Once at Synanon, when you became a little more stable, did the trombone enter in immediately? Were there other musicians that encouraged you?

Synanon has very few rules, but there was always an unwritten rule at Synanon that if a musician came in, don't let him play right away. They felt that the minute you started playing again, and sounded good to yourself, you would leave. You'd say, "Well, I'm cured, and I'll split." As soon as I was able to stand up, which was a few weeks at least, I began playing, but I like to think that rather than causing me to leave, it kept me there, because playing was the one thing that I was familiar with, that I loved to do. We had a good band in Synanon. Art Pepper was there. Also Lou Malin, Lou Lohringer, Kenny Postein, and Greg Dykes, who wrote a couple of cantatas that were recorded.

Was Joe Pass there then?

Joe Pass had already left, and Charlie Hayden had already left, but we had quite a good orchestra, and to this day, there are still some good musicians in Synanon; you probably haven't heard of them, but we have a flute/saxophone player from Australia named David Scott, who is not a drug addict or anything, he just liked me and liked the Synanon lifestyle, and moved in six or seven years ago. He became one of my real close friends, and we do a lot of playing together. We've got some young guys that are phenomenal musicians; one guy plays about nine instruments, so he does a lot of overdubbing and makes his own recordings.

The Synanon experience really has pulled you together; not only are you in good health and playing better than ever, you are now actually working as an administrator for a Houston branch of Synanon, and actually helping other people who are in trouble.

That's true. I'm the director of the Houston branch of Synanon. It's a rather small branch, but economically, most of Synanon's funding comes from Houston. We all work for a living, and we don't get any government funding. We believe that you get a day's pay for a day's work. So we have a sales team down there of about

25 people, plus a few people like myself, who work in and out of the house; we have salesmen who work sell advertising, gifts and specialties.

They sell everything from briefcases to Shaeffer pens to TV sets, to—we have about 50,000 items on our line. We have a catalog that goes out, and it works with some of the biggest companies in the country. We're rated about number 11 in the whole country. There are a few companies that are, of course, much bigger, but for what we do, we do a remarkable job, and that helps us keep going. These people, for the most part, were people like me who had a drug problem at one time, or a booze problem or a pill problem.

And, of course, salesmen have to be able to get along with almost anybody, and so it's a complete reversal of what you would normally expect to happen to an alienated person—all of a sudden, they find themselves on a sales team, and they're out confronting presidents of large businesses. Therapy and work at the same time. We've developed some really unbelievable salespeople who are sharp as a tack and know what they're doing and enjoy it, and do good for Synanon. Of course, our biggest business is taking care of people—that's why we're in existence.

We've been doing this for 25 years, and we've had about 17,000 people come through Synanon. People stay for a week, some people stay for about a year. But we have no contract or commitment papers or anything like that. People come in and if they don't like it or feel they can't make it, they leave after a week or whatever. But in order to really see any results, it took me 20 years to get to the point where I said, "Wow, I really need some help, something's radically wrong with me." It was the first time I had ever admitted that fact to myself; I said, "Drug addicts—yeah, I know about them, that's not me—I work for a living, so that's not me." It takes about a year to effect any kind of a change in a person; you just can't do it overnight.

Who of the more recent players do you think are important?

Well, I have to say hello to Billy Watrous, of course. He's fabulous. I would like to hear more of Albert Mangelsdorff. . . I'd like to hear more of this Swedish player.

Eje Thelin?

Yeah—great! He really intrigues me. Don't forget this young fellow we heard today, Doug Sertl. Twenty-one years old, he's a terrific player. He had his own group and he's heading in the right direction. By the time he's 25 he should be unbeatable.

It seems now that there's a tendency of trombonists to use the microphone as a technique.

I think the use of close miking is a necessity these days. I would rather go without a mike, I used to. I saw Phil Woods recently—they use no mikes and sound great. It makes it easier to play with the microphone. The mike makes you more flexible.

But you do not always know what sound is coming out first.

True.

As someone who has come back from poor health and bad days, do you have any advice for musicians with similar problems?

Yes, they can contact Synanon. Our phone number in Texas is 713/957-2980 and there is lots of literature on Synanon. I'd be glad to talk with anyone. You can't issue a blanket statement that . . . if you don't go to Synanon you're going to die, but if you don't go somewhere for help you're going to be worse or dead. It's not a pleasant thought. I would welcome calls from anyone.

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UPDATE SINCE 1984 CADENCE INTERVIEW
by Sandy Rehak, Emily Quist, and Sue Hummel

What have you been doing the last few years?

Well, in August of 1985, I was diagnosed as having terminal cancer of the larynx and the esophagus. When I found this out, rather than spending a lot of time with doctors, I decided to live the best quality of life available. I was able to pick and choose the musical engagements I did. I picked the fun ones, where I played with the best musicians. For instance, on Labor Day weekend, Dick Gibson's jazz party is one of the musical treats of the

year. He asks 60 musicians to come to Denver, all world class players. We get together and play for three days—12 to 16 hours a day of fun playing. Just the trombone players there should be enough to give anybody a thrill: Urbie Green, Bill Watrous, Slide Hampton, Sir George Chisholm (just knighted by the Queen), Benny Powell, Al Grey, and Trummy Young.

What was the next thing you did?

I was able to get out to Las Vegas and play with a group called 76+4 Trombones.

Did they include the Bay Bones?

Yes. This group was composed of several trombone ensembles from all around the West Coast. Billy Robinson and the Bay Bones showed up; they were an important part of it. I had the opportunity to do some numbers with Carl Fontana, who has been one of my favorite players for years.

What else did you do?

Oh, there have been several reissues of records I made back in the 50s. I keep finding these rare records in stores, or my friends find long-since-forgotten albums I played on. Just last week I discovered that "LeGrand Jazz" has been re-released on compact disc. That was an album I made in 1958. Another album we unearthed was "Winner's Circle," which featured all of the *Downbeat* winners of 1957. I had never heard this record. A friend of mine brought it to me—it was a nice gift.

We have several musicians in Synanon, the most notable being Ed Scott. Ed and I used to do the Garry Moore Show and other assorted shows for CBS in New York in the 50s. He is a fine musician and pianist. We make sure there's a lot of music in the air around Synanon all the time. We are usually busy putting together a show. Ed and I also do a lot of classical playing—trombone and piano sonatas, concertos, etc. Playing with him keeps me on my toes because he is a fine musician himself.

We have another fellow, Doug Robinson, who is becoming quite a composer. He and I have put together several pieces where we overdub an entire orchestra between us, a full band, with vocalists. These have not been released to the public but they are fun to make and we keep getting better at it. Perhaps if

things work out, we'll put an album together of Rehak and Robinson, overdubbing the world.

What about the book you're writing?

I have been working on a book for several years, my autobiography. Some of the Synanon women have worked to transcribe and edit it.

Have you made any new recordings?

Just the ones with Doug Robinson. Doug and I are making a composite recording of what I regard as the best stuff I played during my professional career. Hopefully, we'll come up with an album that is "the best of Rehak."

What about your balloon ride?

Well, when I found out that I had a limited amount of time to live, I decided to have the most fun possible. My wife and I went off on a jaunt to New Orleans, and went on Rehak's balloon ride.

Was it Rehak's first and last balloon ride?

Yes—a hot air balloon. It's a funny little story. The balloon owner heard I was going to die and that my dying wish was to go up in a balloon, because I have travelled in every other kind of conveyance, and a balloon might get me closer to heaven! So at 5 a.m. one Saturday, I found myself getting rigged up for a balloon ride.

Did you take your horn?

Right. I was up about 1000 feet in the air, playing *Around the World in 80 Days* on my horn.

Anything else?

Yeah, I've been having lots of parties with my friends, and playing my instrument every day. I also visited with Dizzy Gillespie and got an interview for my book. No one seems to have the right information about my cancer. I've been given three months to live on several different occasions now. The first three-month period was over a year and a half ago. I'm still here and feeling good, playing my horn and having fun. I intend to keep it that way for a long time to come.

Last spring the cancer was proceeding so slowly that I decided to have chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Then in December the doctors found that

the tumors were growing again, and gave me just three more months. I am still playing and feeling good. I've found that a lot of people are praying for me. I've received letters from several ITA members. One fellow who has cancer himself wrote me a terrific letter. So far, I feel that I'm way ahead of the game. The other thing is that I have been invited to Nashville again this year to attend the Workshop. I hope to be there.

By now you all know that I came to Synanon more dead than alive. I feel fortunate to live in an environment where I can do all the things I just described and keep the quality of my life on a high level. Synanon has really changed my life not once, but twice. If people wish to get in touch with me, they can write to me in care of Synanon, Box 42, Badger, CA 93603. My phone number is 209/337-2885.

NOTE: The facilities of Synanon, founded in 1958 by Charles E. Dederich, are now located in Badger, CA. Synanon provides motivational programs, advertising specialities, and premiums to American businesses. Synanon continues its tradition of solving social problems in the private sector.

Re-released Records Featuring Frank Rehak

LEGRAND JAZZ. Michel Legrand

Phillips 830-074-2 (compact disc)

Given 5 stars by Leonard Feather
WINNER'S CIRCLE.

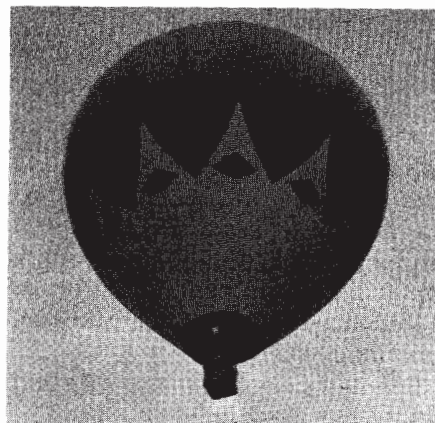
Bethlehem BCP 6066

FLUTIN' THE BIRD—BIRD LIVES

Savoy Jazz SJL1171

Combination of two previous issues
SKETCHES OF SPAIN

CBS CK08271 (compact disc)



"Around the World in 80 Ways," August 1986. Rehak in balloon. (Photo by Roger Woody.)