

MONDAY Q&A

Freelance musician with IUP roots gives new meaning to term 'top brass'

■ **EDITOR'S NOTE:** *You may not have heard of Jim Self, but you've heard his work. Oh, yes, you have — unless you've been living under a rock. In a cave. On Mars. Self, a graduate of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, is a professional freelance musician now living in Los Angeles. He teaches here and there and has played tuba for more than 1,400 movies ranging from "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" to "Avatar." Gazette staff writer Chauncey Ross recently chatted with Self about his career and his understated brass instrument.*

Question: You're a professor — is that your main thing?

Answer: No, I'm a performer as a tuba player. I guess I'm what they call a freelancer. I play in studios in the movie business and I also play classical, I play in the L.A. Opera, I play in the Pacific Symphony, the Pasadena Symphony and the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra. Teaching is part time. I do just like nine hours a week at USC.

Question: You've got a full plate. What's on the schedule today?

Answer: I have to look to tell you. (Pauses) It's a motion picture ... it's a movie called "Grownups." I have no idea whether it's a comedy or something. It's at Fox Studios and the composer is Rupert Gregson Williams. Just (recently opened) is a movie called "Avatar," which you probably heard about, a James Cameron movie. I did lots of work over the last several months playing tuba on that movie.

Question: When our readers go

see that in the theater, which part should they listen for and know it's you?

Answer: It's a huge orchestra, there's a million sounds going on. There's a couple little minor tuba solos. I can't tell you where the tuba would stand out; it's just a part of the orchestra.

Question: When was the first time you picked up and played a tuba?

Answer: I was a guitar player as a young boy, starting age 9, and I was in junior high school, age 13, and they needed a tuba player in the band. The band director — this is in Oil City — asked me to play on tuba. Since I had a little musical training, I picked it up pretty quick. I just sort of fell into it.

When I was thinking of what to do for my life, I was going to be a music teacher. So I went to IUP to be a band director and as a tuba

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Jim Self, at a glance

Job: A performer and freelance tuba player

Age: 66

Family: Wife Jamie, four adult stepchildren and two stepgrandchildren

Residence: Los Angeles

Where I grew up: Oil City

Hobby: Flying

Favorite foods: Pasta, steak

Foods I refuse to eat: Fish, broccoli

Favorite movie: The "Godfather" movies

Last book I read: "The Rest is Noise," by Alex Ross

Favorite way to spend a day: I just get up and do things



Pet peeve: People who don't do what they say they will do or don't finish what they start

People who most inspired me: IUP professors Charlie Davis, William Becker and Dan DeCicco

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major. One thing led to another, you know.

Question: And now you're in Los Angeles.

Answer: I left IUP in '65 and I was lucky enough to get into the U.S. Army Band in Washington, D.C. This was during the Vietnam War time, so I was lucky to get that assignment. And I got my master's degree while I was there, at Catholic University. And then I spent four years in Washington, and I got a job as a professor at the University of Tennessee. And I taught there for five years.

In the summers I started coming to USC in Los Angeles to get a doctor's degree.

And eventually I had to do a residency. I took a year without pay off my job at Tennessee, and finished my doctorate and I just never went back. I started working here, started getting studio work and started teaching in the area. And things just got better and better.

Question: Is being a tuba player competitive?

Answer: There are way too many players for the number of jobs. I don't know if "fierce" is the word. But there is competition, like in any other field, where there's qualified people but not enough jobs.

Question: In your list of credits, you mention "Close Encounters." How memorable was that job?

Answer: Well, it's unique because there were just four musicians and the tuba was very prominent as the voice of the mother ship. It was just one of those things that I just sort of stumbled into. I've done almost 1,500 movies and there are hundreds of them that were good.

I've had solos in lots of movies. One, the "Dennis the Menace" movie that was shown recently on cable, with Walter Matthau, is just loaded with tuba solos. I have so many performances all over the world and I have albums, 10 of them at the moment. I've had a busy, fruitful life as a musician.

Question: It seems a lot of people think of a tuba as just a kind of happy, maybe a funny instrument.

Answer: It is portrayed that way frequently, but it is a lot of things. It's definitely a serious instrument. There are as many great artists on it as there are on all instruments. Most of the time it's just an instrument in the orchestra, but as a solo instrument it's been used in a lot of comic, comedic things and cartoons. ... I play jazz on the tuba, which is really a passion of mine.

Question: Of the work you've done, what would you say are the most vivid mental pictures you have created with tuba music?

Answer: I'm proudest when I think of my albums, because they're unique, they're soloistic, they're mine. I've composed some music and improvised.

Most of them are jazz albums, although there's a couple of classic albums. I'm very proud of those.

I'm an embarrassment of riches, I guess. My most ecstatic moments as a musician are improvising and jazz. I don't think there's any time I get closer to the world, in the sense of God ... than when I'm playing jazz. I'm not a religious person, but I have a oneness with the world when I'm in that position.

Question: Jazz — I wouldn't picture a tuba as a component of a basic jazz group

Answer: In the old days, it used to be played as the bass instrument for Dixieland, but these days, it's extremely rare. Maybe that's my identity in this world, somewhat as being a jazz tuba player, because it's somewhat unique.

Question: Are there any misconceptions about tuba music,

or the instrument, that you encounter that you would like to get to clarify if you have the opportunity?

Answer: Well, that it's somewhat thought of as a comical instrument. Along with that, you probably ascribe negative or pejorative things to it because it's funny and big and comical, but it's not. It's a serious instrument, and it's a beautiful instrument in the hands of a good player. The tuba is not — I mean — we take a certain amount of hits with it as being a funny thing, but we're serious.

Question: Can I ask if you've ever met Martin Mull? About 30 years ago, he got some mileage out of a piece called "Dueling Tubas."

Answer: Oh, yeah. That was just a joke. And that's the kind of thing that perpetuates the stereotype. And even on my own albums, I've done a little of that myself. I mean, I'm not a snob about it. I've had basset hounds howling on my albums.

Question: I was going to ask about that. Your Web domain is bassethoundmusic.com. How do you figure basset hound into this?

Answer: Well, I've had dogs for many, many years, basset hounds, and I just call my little company where I sell music and my CDs and things, I call it Basset Hound Music. I just had the dogs and I kind of love those long-eared things. And we're getting a new one next month, a new basset hound.

Question: How many does that make for you then?

Answer: We don't have any others right now, the last one died, but I've had as many as three at a time, usually one or two, over the last 30 or 40 years.

Question: Your Web site also mentioned you've received some awards. The Most Valuable Player for Tuba by National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. What would you consider the most prestigious, or the most flattering or humbling award or the one that you're most proud of?

Answer: Well, (in 2008) I got the lifetime achievement award from the International Tuba Euphonium Association, the ITEA. And that's, to be recognized by your peers, just like getting an Academy Award, very few people get that and I'm honored.

I also got a lifetime achievement award at IUP, a Distinguished Alumni Award. I was very, very proud of that, and that was 2003. I'm quite active here, I try to support the music school and try to be a good alumnus.

Question: How often do you get back to western Pennsylvania?

Answer: I get there fairly often. I was there in September because a piece of mine was played by the wind ensemble with Jack Stamp, called "Tour de Force."

And the new tuba teacher there is my former student Zach Collins. And I have step-family up in Oil City so I try to go visit them. I get back every year or two. I try to stay connected.

Question: What do you think of the changes they've made at IUP lately?

Answer: I think they're great, especially the music department. They need a concert hall, a recital hall, though. They had Fisher Hall redone, but it's way too big for recitals. They need another addition to the music building but that's going to take some time and money.

■ **NEXT WEEK:** *Cathy Homer, of Strongstown, has a long track record as a dedicated caregiver — to humans and a wide variety of animals.*

■ **EDITOR'S NOTE:** *Do you know someone who would be a great subject for the Monday Q&A? If so, please call Jason Levan at (724) 465-5555, ext. 270.*