

BRASS FANTASIES: LESTER BOWIE (1995)

One steamy, sweltering August night in 1991, the band shell in Brooklyn's Prospect Park suddenly exploded with dazzling sights and astonishing sounds. Three trumpeters, two trombonists, a French horn player, and a tuba player roared out wild, slightly off-kilter renditions of tunes made famous by the likes of Stevie Wonder, Whitney Houston, and even Patsy Cline. The stage lighting reflected brightly off their silver lamé jackets. The drummer wore a white tux. The percussionist performed shirtless.

Out front, a bearded, wiry figure, clad in a metallic blue lab coat, swayed, gyrated, and rocked way back on his heels, growling, sputtering, squeezing notes through his trumpet. Had Brooklyn been invaded by a brass band from a distant galaxy? Well, yes and no: Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy was making one of its rare New York City appearances.

Many jazz musicians come from a musical family, but even so, yours is quite unique. Would you talk a bit about them?

Well, they were all musicians. My father, all his brothers were musicians. There's a photo of the Bartonsville Cornet Band on my album, *All the Magic!*, and his father was the one that started that band. They were in Bartonsville, Maryland, which is about three miles outside of Frederick. That picture was taken in 1911, so it shows you how long this was going on. My ancestors were always musical, even during times of slavery. When there were occasions for music, there were members of my family that did that sort of thing.

And your father was a band director?

He was first in Little Rock. We lived in Little Rock for a while, 'til 1943 when we moved to St. Louis. He got a job in St. Louis.

I've heard that you began music very early, like when you were five years old.

That's the "official" age. When I did my first jazz interview, the guy asked me how long I'd been playing, and I'd never even thought about it 'cause I don't remember not playing. I don't remember beginning. So I called my father, and he said, well, he used to give me the mouthpiece in my crib. But we just made the official age five.

When you come from a family like yours there really is no beginning, is there?

No, you just start and next thing you know, you're playing. I mean, I don't actually remember taking the initial lessons or that first

horn. I just started playing my daddy's horn. I got a cornet later, but by then I could play a little bit and I was in the bands.

As a trained musician, did your father have any negative feelings about jazz?

No, no, no, he didn't have any negative feelings. He just didn't play jazz himself. He played classical trumpet.

So it didn't bother him that you were playing it.

No, no, no, no. But I wasn't really playing jazz coming up. I was playing the fool, I guess! In '55, I used to play with Chuck Berry and people like that who were in St. Louis, before Chuck went to England. Before he went to jail, actually. He got busted, I think, around '56. But anyway, I played a couple of gigs with him and guys like Albert King.

I mean, when I was in high school, I was playing rock and roll, boogie-woogie-type, semi-Dixieland-type. I wasn't really even trying to be a jazz musician. It was later that jazz really took hold of me. I was just playing for fun. I played with all the bands, and it was really just for fun.

In St. Louis you were in high school with some other future jazz musicians – saxophonist Oliver Lake, percussionist Phillip Wilson, pianist John Hicks.

Yeah, Hicks was playing jazz. He was *always* playing jazz, even when he didn't even know but one or two songs. You know, like, when you're a beginner, you don't know but one or two jazz songs, right? But Hicks looked good then. He had that "jazz look" then. They had a group called the MJQ, but they called it the "Mountain Jack Quintet!" Hicks was cool. His two tunes were "Señor Blues" and "Sentimental Journey."

But there was a lot of music in those days in the schools, and we had a lot of good musicians, not just in our school, in all of them. All the schools then had great bands. There were three black schools in St. Louis, and they all had killin' singers and musicians, all that sort of thing.

Is all that changed now? Have the music programs there been cut back?

Yeah, they cut it. Well, that's how hip-hop came about. Everything was cut back in an attempt to take all that away from people, but people – it shows – are still creating an art form anyway, even without any musical knowledge. All those hip-hop kids would have been in bands or choirs or drama clubs or poem clubs, but they don't have that anymore. So you got rap music, but it's still a method of expression. It still ended up being a very powerful message in itself, even without the training.

So you are one jazz musician who actually likes hip-hop.

Oh, yeah. It's got a lot of possibilities. See, I get most of my feeling of music from the people who do it. I like being a musician and I like hanging out with musicians. That's part of why I wanted to be a musician, 'cause I wanted to be around that type of person. And the hip-hop people, I like them. I like their spirit, the life that they have, what they're trying to do under the handicaps that they've had, and what they've done with those handicaps. I mean, they have no problem at all stretching out. None.

Didn't you also know Tina Turner when you were in high school?

I not only knew Tina in high school, I used to do some gigs with Ike Turner, too. And my first wife, Fontella Bass, did some things with Ike. That whole bunch – Ike Turner, Little Milton, Albert King, Oliver Sain – those were the blues groups around the city, the popular ones. There were a lot of other ones, but these were the name groups around St. Louis then.

How did you end up playing carnivals?

After I decided I was gonna be a musician, the first thing I had to learn was how to be a *professional* musician. The first thing you have to learn how to do is to feed yourself with the instrument, period. And that entails playing everything you can. I mean, as a young guy, I don't know where I'm gonna settle. I'm gonna have to play music, so I'm auditioning with everybody that comes through town. Anybody, I don't care what they play, if it's country and western. "Say, do you need a trumpet player?" There was a carnival that passed through St. Louis, so naturally I went down and auditioned. I didn't get the gig right away. They called me later. It was the first time someone flew me up to Canada.

But I auditioned for everybody. I auditioned for James Brown three times. I never did get that job. Everybody that'd ever come through, I would go and see if they needed a trumpet player. You'd read a part and leave your number, and if they needed somebody, they'd give you a ring. And that's how I got all these different experiences.

Man, that carnival band, the gig was about twelve to fourteen hours a day, continuous. We had to go out in front of the tent and play to get people in, and when the tent got full we went back and did the show. Then when the show was over we went back to the front of the tent! So I really learned a lot about endurance.

How do you think these experiences have influenced you as a jazz player?

It's really made me whatever I am, as a result of these experiences. I've done a lot of different things, and it's kept my mind open to

the possibilities. And it's kept me humble, knowing I'm not that great! I mean, the music will keep you humble if you just keep in it. And just meeting all the different musicians I've had to meet, it's just been very interesting.

For instance, in just one week I finished a tour with the Art Ensemble of Chicago last Sunday. Monday I went to Sicily and was with a Sicilian big band, along with a Sicilian small town's marching band. We put them both together and had big concert with that. Came home. Tomorrow I'm doing a session with [organist] Bill Doggett.

So all of this that I did earlier, now it's helping me do all these other things. The experience I had with marching bands and so forth has helped me be able to go to a small town in another country and take a marching band and make some music there, to be able to deal with a big band, a jazz band, sort of, and to be able to deal with R&B sorts of things. So it's helped me.

And all this happened before you got into jazz.

I didn't really get into jazz until I was twenty-one, when I decided to be a jazz musician, for real. I liked jazz before, I always did like it, but I never pictured myself as being a full-time jazz musician. I didn't decide that until I was about to come out of the Air Force. The military's what helped me decide to be a musician.

Were you in the band?

No, I was in the police. I played in a blues band on the side, though. I did shows with the band at the little clubs that they had at the bases, and I played with a service jazz band.

After I got out of the Air Force, I knew I wanted to play, but I didn't play well enough to be a full-time professional musician. I played well enough to have fun. I was always having fun playing, but I needed some more training and some more time to practice. So I went to Lincoln University in Missouri for a year. Then I went to North Texas State for a year. And then after that I just went on the road.

I came back to St. Louis and I met Fontella and I played a lot of blues. And when she started making records, I went out directing her show, and I got a lot of experience leading R&B acts 'cause I was doing all the shows, like the Jackie Wilson show. Being a trumpet player, I'm playing with all the bands, and being the leader, directing her portion of the show, I got to get practice in leading these bands 'cause I'd come down when it was time for our act and then I could direct. So all the experiences really, really helped me.

Why did you choose to settle in Chicago in the mid-1960s instead of New York, which has always been considered a magnet for jazz players?

Well, for people from St. Louis, New York wasn't shit! We wanted to go to Chicago, man. We weren't thinking about New York. Chicago was much hipper, we thought. Plus, when Fontella's record ["Rescue Me"] hit, she was with Chess Records, so we wanted to move there. I mean, that's where all the action was. The music was happening in Chicago. It was like, "Go to New York? For what?"

You had recordings that were organized in Chicago. All those big acts were working out of the Midwest – Jerry Butler, Gene Chandler, Rufus Thomas, Joe Tex. You know, we'd come to New York and work at the Apollo or something and go on back. But New York was like, "Thank you, but no thank you."

When did you first come into contact with the jazz musicians in Chicago, like Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman, with whom you later formed the Art Ensemble of Chicago?

Later, after I was there. When I was first there, I came, like I said, with Fontella, and I was doing record sessions with different people. But there was so much happening in Chicago. I did commercials, I did record sessions, I was doing R&B stuff.

So it was about a year before I met Roscoe and them, and that's just 'cause I was starting to get bored. After all this experience – you have to figure, this was around '64-'65 – I'd learned how to be a professional musician. I had a nice apartment, I had a Bentley, and so I was itching to play some more music. I really wanted to make a living being a jazz musician. And so Chicago enabled me to go into that.

I have one story about that. When I decided to be a jazz musician, I had this little checklist of what I had to do: I had to be original and all this, start your own sound. So I decided I wasn't gonna listen to anybody else, and I was gonna develop all these licks and ways that I played through changes on my own. So I did it. I didn't listen to anybody. I practiced and got my little things together. And then one day I heard a Blue Mitchell record, and Blue Mitchell was playing everything I thought I had made up. So it just goes to show you, even though you may think you have an original idea, you're not the only one thinking.

But Roscoe and these guys were adventurous. They were playing some adventurous music and they were getting some attention. I mean, there were eyes focused on the scene. So I said, "This is perfect."

Not long after that the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians was founded. You must be very proud of what the AACM has accomplished over the past thirty-some years.

Well, AACM was a group of serious musicians that wanted to do something other than what was being done and to present it. And there

was no avenue. The music scene was just about dying out in Chicago at that time. It was being killed – systematically killed – and it was in its last years of really happening. There was no place to do any new music, and that’s what the AACM wanted to do, so they got together. It was great to see so many like-minded musicians get together and organize well enough for it to still be around thirty years later. That has been nothing short of phenomenal.

And the other thing, it sustains itself without any apparent support. It receives some funds, but not many, and the guys aren’t all rich or anything, but there’s a spiritual unity that holds you. It’s like, once you’re an AACM member, you’re always one. It’s like the Mafia.

During the 1960s you spent some time with the Art Ensemble living in Paris. What sort of response did your music receive over there?

Well, before we went to Paris we were doing about four concerts a year in the States. We were rehearsing every day, but we were doing about four a year. I think we were in Paris about three days and we were working about six nights a week! And then we started doing concerts all over. I mean, we did seventy concerts that first year just in France alone – seventy! And this is along with having a home base where we would work six nights a week anytime we weren’t out doing concerts. So we were well received. It wasn’t the “starving musician” routine. We rented us a small villa outside of Paris where we lived, with apple trees and cherry trees. The kids went to nice French schools. We had a great time.

The Art Ensemble has been together now longer than any other group in jazz history except the Modern Jazz Quartet, which, since Connie Kay died, is no longer intact. What is the secret of the group’s longevity?

I don’t know. Evidently we can get along with each other and we’ve got a common goal. The goal is the music, and usually I find if we have the music in common, then everything else is in common, too. Or, everything else can be whatever it is, ’cause if you have the music in common, everything else is gonna be cool. And we’ve been able to just accept each other for whatever and whoever we are. Everyone is allowed to develop at their pace and do whatever they want to do, so it’s just a natural. It’s not even an effort to keep the group together. It stays together naturally.

And we knew that from the beginning, because in the beginning we were already planning our twentieth anniversary concerts, our thirtieth anniversary concerts, and we had that all figured out. We’re working on the fortieth now. And the fiftieth, I don’t know. I think we could retire by then!

How long have you lived in New York?

Well, I've been here a while, now. I've been here over twenty years.

Have you noticed any difference between the scene in Chicago that produced the AACM and the jazz scene in New York?

Oh, yeah. Of course. See, Chicago, places in the Midwest, breed music. New York is the market. This is where you come to sell it. So you've got a whole different attitude here. I mean, Bird was playing with his friends in Kansas City before he got here, and Miles in St. Louis. These concepts are developed elsewhere, and then you bring them to New York to sell them 'cause this is the marketplace. Where else are you gonna sell jazz? So by it being a market center, it's not a place that really breeds the music. It's a place where guys come to work. All the guys who were working in Harlem were from South Carolina and Chicago and Kansas City. Everybody was going to New York from Detroit and Virginia and Washington.

New York is a city where nobody's from New York. I mean, who was born here? There are some, of course, but how many of those major musicians were New York natives? One or two. A couple of guys from Brooklyn, maybe Max [Roach] or somebody. But most of those guys, Trane, Diz, Miles, they're all from everywhere else. New York is the place where, when people get it together, they bring it here and package it and try to get paid for it because they can't get paid for it anywhere else in the country.

Because of that, do you think that New York is more competitive and less cooperative than, say, Chicago?

No, it's not that it's more competitive. It's just nobody's trying to get it together. Everybody's trying to sell stuff. Nobody's here trying to collaborate and all this, "We get together for the spirit of the music. We don't really care if we're working." This is New York. Everybody's trying to sell, so they're not trying to just get together.

The AACM was a bunch of guys that got together every couple days, every Monday, every Sunday, whatever day it was we were meeting, and you can't do that sort of thing here. I mean, you can't have a meeting with the guys because half the guys are all over the world. No telling who's in town when. I'm not saying anything negative about it, but it's just a different scene. It's not a place that breeds. Guys in St. Louis come up with a belief in the music, and they learn how to play because they believe in it, not because they're gonna get paid for it. They know they're *not* gonna get paid for it.

And most of the people that built the New York loft scene in the

1970s came out of the AACM in Chicago or the Black Artists Group in St. Louis.

You're right. And they did that kind of thing all over. But like I say, we came up believing in the music. When you're believing in the music, you're just trying to get together for the sake of getting together. And at that time musicians were still playing together. I think that loft scene was the last time that musicians in New York even played together. Now that doesn't happen anymore, and it really hurts the scene.

Do you think it is necessary for young musicians to come to New York?

I mean, it's not "necessary." We proved that by being the Art Ensemble of Chicago. We proved years ago that it wasn't necessary to come to New York. But you gotta go somewhere!

You know, I was reading Henry Threadgill's article in *Down Beat*, and he said it right. He said, "We're international musicians now, and we have to have an international approach." This is what we do. We don't approach it as just being an American music. It's "earth music" now. Whoever wants to support that music anywhere on the planet is entitled to the music. So we're all international musicians. We work all over the world.

And the guys don't necessarily have to come to New York. But as a musician you are a messenger of sorts, and you are obligated to go somewhere. You just can't stay at home and expect to make it. It's not that kind of a job. If you want to be a musician, be ready to have a light suitcase packed, and you may have to do some traveling, no telling where. It could be Europe, it could be the Far East, the South Sea Islands – it could be anywhere. But you have to travel.

And then if you travel, you build up your reputation. You go to South America, you hang out in Rio. You hang out in this place and you hang out in this place. You play as well as you can. You practice. You try to get connections. You try to meet people so that you can go back to these places, and then there's one place you can go back to once a year. Next thing you know, you got an independent, international network of places, and you can always go there and work. That's the hard way to do it, and that's the only real way to do it. Other than that, you can maybe wait to get discovered by some record company.

In 1970 you told Valerie Wilmer, in a Down Beat article, "I really don't have fantastic chops. Actually I'm one of the weakest trumpet players around, but I've learned a lot from being weak." Do you still feel that way?

Sure. Oh yeah, I'm not a "natural" trumpet player. I always say

when I come back in the next life, I'm gonna be some kind of musician who doesn't have to use his face to play and doesn't have to use his mouth in particular. I want to be something like a piano player, a bass player, a drummer, so I can use my face for hip expressions. [*He demonstrates a few "hip" facial expressions.*]

I mean, I don't think I'm a natural trumpet player, but I've learned how to utilize my weaknesses and to make something of those. I play trumpet reasonably well now, but I'm not a natural trumpeter. I'm a natural musician, so since trumpet is my instrument, since that's all I can play, I have to do what I can do with that. I'm a natural musician, though. Definitely.

Well, let's talk about your approach to the trumpet. I would describe it as being highly original, and maybe you can take it from there.

I guess it is original – I mean, that's what it should be. You just approach it the way you feel it. I try to approach trumpet playing with just an open attitude, accept every bit of advice I can get, try to do things as many different ways as possible, not to limit myself technically or conceptually. It's to try to remain open. That's the only way you can really learn.

Then you have to find a way to express yourself. The music I play is the only music I *can* play because this is the only one that really allows me to express all these feelings I have in a single music. I mean, I couldn't just be a blues musician, even though I'm half blues anyway. I need to be something that kind of contains all of it.

And my approach to the instrument is the same way. I would listen to every good trumpet player and try to glean whatever I could from them, their style or something they played or technically how they're doing something. I have no qualms about stealing anything from anybody at anytime. I have no problems studying music at any age. At my age now I still realize that I must do a lot of studying. So it's just a matter of just remaining open, open to any possibilities.

Things you come across accidentally, things you just may hear, you try to do those things. You try to see how those things will project. So it takes a lot of research. That's why I wear a white lab coat. That's what it stands for: research. I been researchin' my ass off.

In connection with your group, Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy, you use a couple of concepts that I'd like you to comment about. First, there's "avant pop."

Well, this is like pop music done in a really creative manner, which sometimes isn't apparent at first. For instance, we'll take a Whitney Houston song, a song that was made great by a singer. But we'll



Carol Steuer

have no singer. And we'll do a brass arrangement that will have no guitars, no keyboards, but at the same time people can recognize it and appreciate it for what it is and for what is implied. So it's sort of like creativity that's not readily apparent.

You know, a lot of people leave a Brass Fantasy concert and then

they realize, maybe the next day, “There were no keyboards with that group. There were no guitars.” They realize that they actually sat there and enjoyed it and didn’t miss anything. And that requires quite a bit of creativity from the writers and from the musicians. So that’s why we call it “avant pop.” It sounds like it’s pop, but it takes an “avant” sort of approach to this music to make it even be “pop,” I mean, for a brass band to be playing some of the material we play.

And you treat this pop material very seriously. There’s a lot of humor and fun in the performance, but you’re not just fooling around up there. Is that where your idea of “serious fun” fits in?

This is deadly serious. I don’t believe in playing down to an audience because one thing that the business has done, they try to underestimate the intelligence of an audience. I can’t do that. I realize that there’s people out there at my concert that’ll be at the opera the next day. They’ll be at a blues concert the next day. They will go see a big band or a radio orchestra the day after that. They’re gonna be at a heavy metal concert. These are people that have at their disposal all sorts of things. So I believe that we can’t underestimate the intelligence of anyone that’s listening to us. I would never attempt to play down. I play anything I want to play, but the approach will always be serious.

See, that is one of the traditions of jazz we overlook. We get into looking at people who aren’t creating music anymore and listening to what they have to say, and we get sidetracked. I was in Poland when Wynton was in Poland, and he said in a press conference that Miles Davis was the worst thing that happened in the music in the twentieth century. And the Polish writers went into shock. You know, they love Miles in Poland. And his reason was that Miles played this pop tune by Cyndi Lauper [“Time After Time”] and that was “demeaning” to jazz.

I don’t know why these guys could say that. What do you think Bird did or everyone did? Count Basie, Fletcher Henderson, Jimmie Lunceford, they all played pop tunes. I mean, that was the whole idea. Miles when he got famous, he was playing “Bye Bye, Blackbird,” “Surrey with the Fringe on Top.” That was in 1955. What’s the difference between 1955 and 1990? It’s the same basic concept.

They get uptight about that, and actually they’re getting away from the whole essence of what the music actually is. This is an art form, it’s not an academic exercise. And it’s this music of the people, what we do and what we think, and therefore it’s got to include the whole totality of expression.

That raises an interesting issue: The Brass Fantasy plays familiar tunes, the presentation is visually striking, so you’d expect it to be

popular in the United States. The band works a lot in Europe but rarely here. Why is that?

It beats the shit out of me, man. I haven't any idea. But we've enjoyed immense success when we have worked in the States. I don't know if people are afraid of the music or – I don't know – it could be I'm not pushing hard enough on my side. And as the years go by, I tend to push less and less to work in the States because they call me all the time to go somewhere else. The only time I get to spend with my family is when I'm at home. And since I really am getting used to not working here, it's kind of nice.

The band gets over whenever it's heard. We've never had a problem with acceptance anywhere we've ever played, anywhere. It's just that we don't get that many calls in the States. I think they're into musicians that they control or something, I don't know. See, I don't really spend too much time worrying about the reasons for it. I tried to think, "What could it be?" The Brass Fantasy has everything, like you say. Anyone can understand it. The guys have great uniforms – I think there's six wardrobe changes! I mean, it was intended to be a show band. And what's a better place for 'em, really, to work well?

But I don't get a bunch of gigs. See, in America I think you have to be in the loop, so to speak. You have to be with a recording company, and then you have to have management. That's a whole bunch of things that you need to be in, and recording companies and management don't want to be bothered with an old jazz musician. It's not that they're not aware of what we're doing. I mean, we are working internationally all the time, drawing thousands of people every night. We're doing standing-room-only business all over the world. I guess it's just a matter of time. Meanwhile, life has to go on.

I once heard that you've had the idea of forming a traveling tent show. Could you explain that?

That's something that I've been wanting to do for years. I've just never been able to get it together. I've always wanted to bring around a tent show with really hip music – singers, dancers, bands, combos, duets, trios – a whole big musical aggregation that was traveling, set up like the Big Apple Circus.

Would you set up on fairgrounds?

Fairgrounds all over the country. Start off with all the little, small towns and just hit them with the real thing. Let them really hear what jazz is. I always named that project "Bring America's Music Home." What we need in jazz is a grass-roots movement. It should be like they do with country and western music. Country and western

music is grass roots. People take those shows to those fairgrounds and say, "Here it is." Same thing can be with jazz. People will like it just as much as anything else.

And this would be a great antidote to the "concert hall mentality" that has infested the music.

Definitely, definitely. I'm not a concert-hall-type person. I'm more a tent show person, and I know that's the way to bring the music to people who wouldn't ordinarily get to a concert hall. People live in places where they don't have concert halls. We need to get this music to the people. This needs to go on down in the South. People are dying for it in the South. They're dying for it in all sorts of places. All these little towns would love to have a concert, love it. And we could give that to them.

I don't mind seeing jazz at Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall or the Kennedy Center, but what bothers me is the idea that until it got into these places, jazz was some sort of second-class music. You know, "Now we have arrived."

That's what gets me, too. I don't mind either. I'm glad to see it at Lincoln Center. I'm glad to see the music anywhere it can be.

Right. The problem is the way they present it there.

That's another issue. But I don't even need to work Lincoln Center. What for? That doesn't mean anything to me. That doesn't prove anything. That doesn't validate anything. Matter of fact, I would *not* work Lincoln Center because I wouldn't want to validate their shit! The only reason they would even hire me up there would be to validate something, and they would never get me up there to validate none of that shit.

How do you feel about the state of jazz today?

Well, what's right about it is we've had a lot of support worldwide for creative music, and that is the most right thing. The wrongest thing about it are these things that are happening, like we've been speaking about: people trying to force an attitude or trying to determine the direction. The music will determine its own direction. There's no company or group of people that can dictate what the music is or what it's gonna be. The music will determine that for itself, and its effect will be felt worldwide.

We have to get art back to where it's functional. It's not just something you put on a wall or something you put in a library or something you see in a concert hall. Books are functional. You read books so you can learn something. You learn music to use it. That's the way it was in Africa. Art was functional. It's part of life. This is how you define your-

self, how you learn about yourself. But we don't use it anymore. We've got to get back into that.

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In the summer of 1996 Lester Bowie returned to Prospect Park for the debut of his "Hip-Hop Feel-Harmonic," a musical three-ring circus composed of eleven brass, five reeds, seven strings, keyboards, guitar, electric bass, drums, percussion, rappers, singers, dancers, and a disc jockey, all held together by Bowie's unflappable conductor, Earl McIntyre. Sadly, his traveling tent show never came to fruition – Bowie died on November 9, 1999 at the age of 58.