

The Studio Tubist

*The following was first published in 1988 in the **Instrumentalist** magazine. It is followed by an update to February 2004-- outlining the many changes in the "business" and how it affects the contemporary tubist. **Jim Self***

1988

This report on the contemporary recording scene for tuba players is a reflection of my fourteen years as a free-lance musician in Los Angeles. The points expressed are specific for my city but will generally be true for New York, the only other city where large amounts of recording work are done. All kinds of recording sessions are done in both cities but Los Angeles is the center for motion pictures and television and New York the center for jingles (ads for radio and T.V.) and jazz records. Pop records are done in both cities. Nashville, Chicago, Dallas and Toronto also have some recording work but very little for tubists.

Much has been said about the electronic revolution and it's effect on work for acoustic instruments. The horror stories, I'm sorry to say, are true and they are especially true in the studios where synthesizers have decimated the jobs for standard orchestral instruments. Producers and audiences are always looking for the latest sounds, regardless of quality, to the point where some estimates say that 75% of all film and television and almost all rock records are done with computers and synthesizers. This, of course, means less work for tubists. A whole generation of people have the notion that our instruments and indeed all strings, woodwinds and brass are old fashioned. Now that I have given the down side there is some hope for a better future. There recently seems to be a small backlash to the electronic bombardment and with it a desire on the part of composers to use larger orchestras and to use synthesizers and acoustic instruments in creative combinations.

There is and always will be some work for tuba players. But it does mean that those who do the work and prospective studio tubists must be exceptional and versatile musicians. In Los Angeles there are only three or four tubists making a professional living in the studios. We all double on bass trombone and other instruments, and all do a variety of other jobs: in symphony, opera and ballet orchestras; in jazz and dance bands; and

teaching in area colleges. Most of the studio bass trombonists double on tuba and there are also several fine young tubists who occasionally get a studio job.

In the early days of recording microphones were so poor that louder instruments, such as the recording tuba or sousaphone, played an important role. The tuba was the predominant bass voice in all the early motion pictures and records, and the first recordings of Mozart and Haydn Symphonies were made with a sousaphone doubling the string basses. Tubas were important instruments in the bands of the Dixieland era and this was reflected in the Hollywood studios. As styles changed in the 30's and 40's the string bass took over the primary bass role and tuba players became bass doublers. With few exceptions they were better bass players than tuba players. From the beginnings of sound motion pictures until the late 50's the major film studios had contract orchestras that gave employment to many tuba/bass players. In the 40's and 50's there may have been 15 to 20 tubists in the business. About 1960, when television came of age, the studios disbanded their orchestras and all the film work was then on a free-lance basis with generally smaller orchestras and a resultant net loss of work for tubists. About this time the nature of the music changed drastically. Rock and roll was in and the electric bass became the primary bass voice. The tuba became more of a specialized instrument. It was used for dramatic effect, comedy and for source music (dixieland, band music, etc). The role of the tuba further changed in the mid-sixties when Tommy Johnson "broke into the business". He was the first "modern" tubist to play in the studios. He played CC tuba and was a virtuoso soloist. The composers wrote for his talents-- firmly establishing the tuba as an important solo instrument. Tommy set the standard for technical ability and solo playing which, to this day, all studio tubists must be compared. Don Waldrop and Tommy also established the bass trombone as the standard double for tuba players. Today it would be very difficult for a tuba player to make a good living in the studios without that double. Besides it pays 50% more.

*What are the requirements for a good studio tuba player? First and foremost he or she should have a strong formal education--one that emphasizes private lessons, recital literature and band, orchestra and chamber music. Preparation for a symphonic career would be a strong beginning. Having the basics of good tone, strong technique, musicality, rhythmic precision, a solo flare, good intonation and accuracy are absolutely essential. Many of these are learned in college but it takes many years of paying dues to perfect them. Remember that the tuba is usually on

a separate microphone and any error or weakness is heard and recorded. Studio playing is not for the novice.

*One of the most important requirements is the ability to sight read. You do not see the music until you arrive at the recording date. One read through and record is the norm, but sometimes there will be no rehearsal. It could be whole notes or a solo that looks like the Kraft Encounters II, or it could be a long big band chart on bass trombone, four bars rest followed by a hair-raising tuba solo--you never know. And you must remain cool even if you have to play your solos ten times because of other errors in the performance. I learned a great deal about sight-reading and confidence in The U.S. Army Band where we often played with no rehearsal.

*A good sense of rhythm and the ability to quickly analyze and play rhythmic figures, patterns and meters is a must for studio musicians. This requires experience with all the hundreds of diverse styles in music--latin tempos, rock, polkas, dixieland, jazz, odd-meters, as well as Mozart, Wagner and Stravinsky. My years on the Don Ellis band were invaluable. I learned to relax and play in many unusual meters (7/8, 9/2, 33/32, etc.). Since my teenage years I have been a bass player and attribute much of my knowledge of musical styles to those experiences. I strongly encourage my tuba students to learn bass not only because they will learn styles and the ability to play in a rhythm section but also because it's fun and a good way to earn money. The correct interpretation of jazz and swing rhythms is an absolute must. Studio tubists are frequently required to play with (or in place of) the bass player and it is important to know the right "feel".

*Another useful skill is the ability to read chord changes and to improvise jazz. This does not mean to play only the root and 5th of the chord, it means to create a solo or bass line with a good "feel" based on the correct scales and in the style of the masters. To do this requires hard work. Occasionally a musician is asked to play something in another key or he may be asked to play someone else's part by rote. Jazz, transpositions and indeed all ensemble playing require a mature "ear".

The best recording instruments are tubas that have a clear tone. Big orchestral tubas often dominate the room and leak into other mikes. They also respond slower and do not record well because of the preponderance of low frequencies. My standard instruments for a recording date are a medium-bore CC Tuba, an F Tuba and a bass trombone--with all the appropriate mutes of course.

Getting work in the studios is complex and no two experiences are the same. It is, however, necessary to spend many years getting to know composers and contractors, attracting attention to your work outside the studios, getting the respect and endorsement of other tuba players and establishing a reputation for dependability. One must also be pleasant and professional on the job. There is no room for prima donnas in the studios--time is money.

A career in the recording industry can be a very satisfying and rewarding life. The pay is excellent--but there are dry periods without work. There is no tenure-- but it is healthy to know that you must do a good job to be called again. And for a tuba player the opportunity to play solos and challenging parts comes much more frequently than in a symphony position.

2004

It is 16 years later and I am in my 30th year of working in the Los Angeles recording studios. Most of the 1988 article remains valid today. The following is a report of the changes and trends that, from my perspective, are important to tuba players. This should also present information to young tubists who are contemplating a career as a studio tubist.

There seems to be a sense "out there" in the tuba world that, since it is almost impossible to win a good job in a symphony orchestra or military band (by audition) that one can just go to the big city and get work as a free-lancer. Many, many fine tubists have come to Los Angeles during my 30 years only to find that it is more difficult to get good jobs here than to win an audition. Very few have the skills, the stamina, the connections, the money and the luck to spend 10-20 years breaking-in. There is a huge naivete about both their understanding of the business and their relative talents.

Television orchestras took a big dive in the 1980's and '90's. Now, in 2004, it seems like there is almost no work for orchestral instruments in television. The only regular TV shows that use an orchestra with tuba (doubling bass trombone) are Enterprise and Jag. I play both of them. The Simpsons is the only other TV Show that uses a live scoring studio orchestra. They rarely use tuba but Tommy Johnson is usually the player when they do. Contrast this with the late 1970's when dozens of TV shows

used orchestras. Today it's almost all being done in "garage" studios-the composer doing it all. Digital technology has made it possible for almost anyone to use samples and create scores. Musicians are our own worst enemies because some will work for little or no money just to play. Some have even recorded tuba "samples" that have replaced thousands of "live" players on recordings. We see these things in the digital piracy of films and CDs too. Film music is often recorded in Canada where (because of the dollar) the same union rates are 1/3 less than in America. Some music is recorded in poor European countries where musicians will work for poverty wages. Worst of all are the "scab" musicians in American cities who lower the bar for all musicians. I don't have an answer but I do know that in the present political and economic climate producers will get their music as cheaply as possible--quality means very little. There is even less work now than in 1988 and an even more pessimistic view of the future. Tubas, and indeed all orchestral instruments, are "antique" and their future is cloudy at best. These things come at a time when colleges are churning out dozens of wonderful tubists each year--with no playing prospects in sight.

Now for the bright side. In recent years in Hollywood the "large" orchestral scores, so important to big budget films, have remained strong. Pressure is often put on composers to record in England or elsewhere to save money but many of the best films are still scored here. These orchestras are symphonic size and usually use a tuba player--sometimes more than one. All of these projects however can only provide work for two or three tubas players to make a professional living. A day in Los Angeles when there are more than two studio jobs for tubists is rare. 1988 to about 1999 were pretty good years for big movie orchestra in Hollywood. Then we had three bad years where work was down about 30%--mostly because work was being done elsewhere on the cheap. Then last year was a good year (they say because 9/11 made producers reluctant to record overseas). So far in 2004 movie work is very bad for everyone. We don't know why and hope it will pick up but, for the moment, everyone is paranoid and worried about paying the bills and qualifying for health insurance.

At this time, Tommy Johnson and I still do the large majority of the available studio jobs. Three others, John Van Houten, Fred Greene, and Doug Tornquist and, occasionally, Norm Pearson of the LA Phil will get called for recording gigs. After them there are many highly qualified younger players who "stand-in-line" for that occasional job. They are paying their dues. For new tubists "in town" it is a long line and chances of getting any recording work is rather bleak.

There is a "pecking" order that some think is discriminating but I think it is both necessary and fair in the long run. Generally speaking the ones who get the jobs are those who have paid dues, invested in a long career here and have earned the respect of the musicians around them. For my orchestra jobs I have a set list of subs that the contractor must call. These people are wonderful musicians and deserve to be called. If someone asks me for a recommendation for a recording or other job I go to my list. I never recommend someone I don't know or who is new in town. If someone gets a gig on my advice and doesn't please the composer, conductor or contractor, they will be mad at me. Time is money they say. Without the "lists" you would have a free-for-all where no one makes a living playing tuba. Everyone would have to have "day jobs" to survive. No one would quality for health care and everyone would compete to such an extent that the union would fail and jobs would go to the player who would work the cheapest or, as I said before, work for free. The only way for quality and professionalism to win is to stand together as musicians and demand professional scales and working conditions. Free-lancing can be a career of frustration and maybe even paranoia.

In the early 90's Tommy Johnson and I introduced the Cimbasso to composers and it has become the instrument of choice for loud edgy low parts--action films. It would be very difficult for a tuba player to make a good living in the studios without this double. It took me many years to acquire and learn to play all the instruments that are needed to be a successful LA studio player. I drive a truck now because I need to have a truck full of instruments ready. Since 1988 my standard list of instruments (that I usually have with me for studio work) has increased. I have available a large CC Tuba, a medium CC Tuba, an F Tuba, a Cimbasso in BBb, a Cimbasso in F and a Bass Trombone--and mutes for all. I sometimes have a Euphonium, a Contra-Bass Trombone, my new FLUBA, a Sousaphone or (rarely these days) an Electric Bass.

The ideal studio tuba player remains the same in 2004 as it did in 1988. While a trumpet player can be just a classical player or a big band player and find his niche as a studio musician (there are many more jobs for them) a tubist must be more versitile. He (or she) must be an excellent classical musician and have commercial skills too. You must be a great sight reader, have a good sense of rhythm, be a credible doubler, have a solo flare and be able to improvise. I refer back to the paragraphs (*) from 1988 about the requirements for a good studio tuba player and remind all that it is not a business for the novice.

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Jim Self is a Los Angeles free-lance musician, a veteran of over 1100 motion picture scores, hundreds of television shows and records, and is tuba soloist on many prominent movies. Recent films include *Cat in the Hat*, *Elf*, *Peter Pan* and *Lemony Snicket*. He is Principal Tuba/Cimbasso with the Pasadena and Pacific Symphonies, the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra and the Los Angeles Opera and Opera Pacific orchestras. Jim holds degrees from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Catholic University and a DMA from the University of Southern California-- where he teaches tuba and chamber music. Jim is a past president of T.U.B.A., a former member of The U.S. Army Band, Washington, D.C and was on the faculty at the University of Tennessee. His compositions and arrangements include works for solo tuba, brass quintet, brass band and other brass, woodwind and string chamber music. Jim has produced eight solo jazz and classical recordings. Just released is a CD entitled "My America" with arrangements of American songs by Kim Scharnberg. Jim is assisted by a great band of L.A. studio musicians and plays his new horn--the FLUBA. All of Jim Self's recordings and compositions are available from www.bassethoundmusic.com. Jim Self is a Yamaha Performing Artist.

