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Inside the  
recording studio

with LA's elite  
trombone players





In the studio

# with LA's elite recording trombone

The overhead lights dim and the red light comes on. Instantly, the atmosphere in the studio changes. Like a lens being pulled into focus, you can feel the players' concentration sharpen. Utter silence fills the room.

BY ANDREA BEVINGTON

**A**t Todd-AO Studio on the CBS lot outside Los Angeles, lunch break has ended and the players have begun filtering back in for the second half of a double session. The scores to some of the most beloved movies ever, including *The Quiet Man* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, were recorded here on what was once the scoring stage of Republic Studios. Today's score is for a picture called *Mystery, Alaska*—a Disney comedy about a small town in Alaska whose hockey team is chosen to host a televised event.

Todd-AO is one of the top soundtrack recording studios in Los Angeles, and the players here today are among the studio world's most elite. Yet, the atmosphere is surprisingly casual. Many players are in jeans and sweatpants; a few are in their stocking feet. They talk and joke amiably. Some play a few warm-up notes.

"Welcome back," says composer Carter Burwell, and immediately the small talk

comes to an end and coffee cups and water bottles are relocated to the floor. In the trombone section, the players put on their headphones for the first run-through of the afternoon. Alan Kaplan is playing first chair, with Bill Reichenbach and Phil Teele on second and third, respectively.

horns are located on the other side of the wind section, so that their sound doesn't "leak" into the rest of the brass section's microphones.

A quick glance at the music on the trombone players' stands reveals a book with a lot of rests. Trombones tend to have fewer

Back row, left to right: Bob Sanders, Alan Kaplan, Charlie Loper, Steve Holtman, Phil Teele, Bill Reichenbach, George Thatcher. Front row, left to right: Bruce Fowler, Bob McChesney, Bruce Paulson, Andy Malloy, Dick Nash.



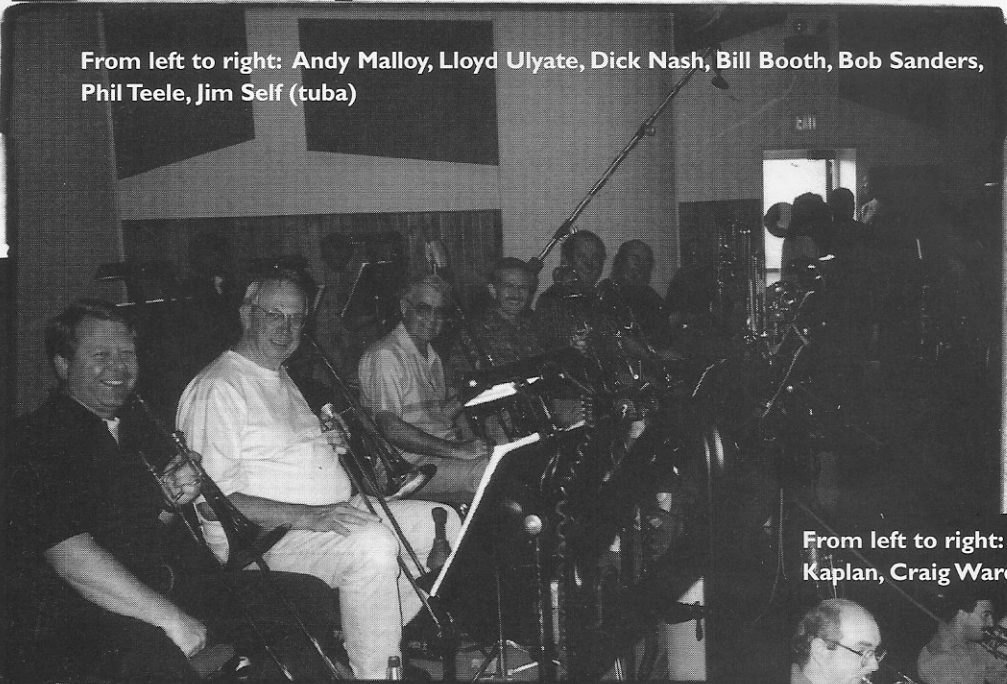
Trombone and euphonium player Loren Marsteller is today playing an eighteenth-century instrument called the ophicleide, the predecessor of the modern tuba. The orchestra is set-up in a semi-circle around the conductor and orchestrator, with the trombones, trumpets and tuba facing the conductor at one o'clock. The French

notes to play than, say, trumpets or French horns. The challenge is to come in exactly on cue, hit exactly the right note, and hold it for exactly the right length of time. The old adage that studio work is 99 percent boredom and one percent terror couldn't be more apt.

The first rehearsal reveals a tempo change

# players

From left to right: Andy Malloy, Lloyd Ulyate, Dick Nash, Bill Booth, Bob Sanders, Phil Teele, Jim Self (tuba)



that isn't reflected on the click track. As the composer and orchestrator begin reworking the dynamics of the cue (the term for a discreet chunk of music), the players pull out crossword puzzles, magazines and newspapers. Downtime is part of the life of a studio musician, and the players come prepared. But this afternoon's delay is a brief one. Headphones go back on for one more run-through. Then the overhead lights dim and the red light comes on. Instantly, the atmosphere in the studio changes. Like a lens being pulled into focus, you can feel the players' concentration sharpen. Utter silence fills the room. Burwell raises his arm, and the horns and percussion come in softly, building to crescendo. A cymbal clashes. Ten minutes

later, it's a take. Although the players saw the score for the first time this morning and rehearsed the cue just twice before recording it, they've already moved on to the next cue.

Studio work isn't for everybody. Nobody gets famous playing on movie soundtracks or television shows; in fact, musicians are rarely even listed in the credits. Although millions may hear your work, few people outside the studio world know your name. Yet, for the three dozen or so trombone players in Los Angeles who work regularly on motion picture soundtracks and on television shows, cartoons, and commercials,

studio work has its own rewards.

"Anonymity doesn't bother me," says trombonist Alan Kaplan. Kaplan, in his mid-forties, is a 22-year veteran of the studio scene. "One of the reasons I wanted to be a studio player is, when I was taking lessons with studio players, I saw they had houses, they had families, they weren't out on the road living in hotels. I thought, If I'm going to be a musician, that's the way I'd like to do it. I didn't want to be a starving artist. And I didn't have this great burning image in my head of my own music that I wanted to go out and show the world. I was happy being called to play somebody else's music and really doing it right. Since that was my artistic goal anyway, studio work was a natural direction for me to go in. And I've pretty much gotten what I wanted. I do have a wife and a beautiful kid and a house. And I really couldn't hope for more."

"It's a good living," he adds. Most players are reluctant to discuss their earnings; however, it's not hard to figure out what ballpark these guys are playing in. Consider the fact that union scale for a six-hour double session is \$451. Players in demand—those who frequently occupy

first chair—can command 50 percent over scale or even double scale.

Players can also earn over scale for playing solos—although that's not automatic. Explains Dick Nash, who, along with Lloyd Ulyate, is considered one of the "sages" of trombone

in L.A., "If you're playing first chair, you're already getting time-and-a-half or a double check or whatever you can demand; and whatever is in the book, that's your responsibility to play. You're not necessarily going to ask for more money on the spot if you've got a solo. It's your task, your workload, to cover all the things that come up, including the solos. That's just expected of you. For the most part, 90 percent of the time, we'll walk in, and if there's a solo, it might be just one tune or two tunes or a 32-bar ballad, and you just let it go."

From left to right: Alex Iles, Alan Kaplan, Craig Ward





However, he adds, the situation is different if the musician knows about the solo up front, and if it's a demanding one—such as a Tommy Dorsey tune. “Then you might say, ‘I’ve got to get a little more money; give me double-and-a-half’ or something like that.”

Nash adds that most trombone solos occur in source music—music that occurs incidental to the main action of the film, such as period songs heard during a night club scene. “Trombones don’t usually get ‘legitimate’ solos. Trumpets usually get a lot of those scored, big, more moody things. Trombones are usually ‘glue’ in heavy legit situations, unless there’s a big chase or a fight or something like that, and then we’re more active.”

There’s no such thing as “typical” day for a studio musician—or a typical week, for that matter. It’s not unusual to have three jobs one day and none the next. Just recently, Kaplan was scheduled for an 8 a.m. jingle, then a 10 o’clock double for a cartoon, followed by a 7:30 p.m. session. “That,” he recalls, “was a busy day.”

Despite the irregularity of players’

**“The time-tested people, the names that come up consistently, come up for a reason. They really do have the goods to back up what they do.”**

**—ALEX ILES**

schedules, it doesn’t take much arithmetic to figure out that a top-flight studio musician who works regularly can easily earn in excess of \$100,000 a year. For this reason, to many outsiders, the studio world may seem like an elite, highly paid club—one that’s closed to newcomers. In fact, though, new players are added to the contractors’ rosters all the time. So what does it take to get your name on that list?

Ability, for starters. Studio musicians have to be able to deliver the goods the first time and every time. Explains contractor

Patti Zimmitti, who books many of the studio gigs in Los Angeles, “When you walk into the studios, you’re not playing the literature, you’re not playing anything that you’re familiar with or that you’ve been playing since you were a small child, when you started taking lessons. When you walk in on a film call, you’re playing something that you’ve never seen before.” Sight-reading is imperative, she says, and so is being

And these guys give it to you all day long.”

Long-time trombonist Lloyd Ulyate believes that the main requirement is “the ability to concentrate so that everything is out of your mind except playing this music great—however humble the music might be. Most of the music we play, in my estimation, is relatively simple, but what you have to do is learn to play relatively simple music just great—just playing everything perfect.”

**Left to right: Phil Teele, Bill Reichenbach, Tommy Johnson**



quick on one’s feet. The composer or the conductor is likely to be up there making changes on the fly, and musicians have to be able to adapt instantaneously.

As critical as ability is, attitude is equally important. Studio work is teamwork; players have to be able to function as team. “You’re part of a bigger picture, and you have to understand that concept,” says Zimmitti. She makes it clear that there’s no room in the studio world for prima donnas or slackers. Of the top players on her list, she says: “You could have these guys work all day, it could be John Williams and it could be exhausting, and then you turn around and do a date that night with Danny Elfman that’s just as complicated, just as difficult, and you will get 150%. The amount of concentration it takes is just amazing.

For contractor Sandy DeCrescent—who handles more soundtrack work than any other contractor in L.A.—it’s versatility more than anything else that sets the top trombone players apart. Often, she says, after recording a very “legitimate” score all day, the musicians will be required to play source music that’s in a jazz or rock or other style. They have to be able to make a seamless transition between styles. Trombonist Alan Kaplan agrees that “studio work covers everything. Any period and any style of music comes up. You might have a movie that takes place in the ‘20s or ‘30s, so the music is going to be that style. Or you might have a TV commercial, which can be any style music.”

“I think what a studio trombone player needs to do—and what I’ve always tried to



to right: Alan Kaplan, Charlie Loper



do—is be versatile and be able to do anything, any style of music, and do it convincingly. It's not just playing your instrument well. It goes without saying that you have to play your instrument well and you have to be able to play in tune. But it's more than just playing the notes on the page. You have to be a quick study for styles."

"Symphonic scores are in vogue right now," Kaplan continues, "and a lot of people who have a symphonic background are doing more studio work because of that. But in the 22 years that I've been doing this, I've seen a lot music changes happen. What I've always wanted to do was be able to play any style and make it sound like that's what I do mainly. For example, if someone hears me play rock 'n' roll, I want him to think that I'm really a rock 'n' roller, that I must have started out playing in garage bands. You try to be a chameleon. You try to be indistinguishable at what your strength is and have no weaknesses."

References to that color-changing lizard pop up frequently in conversations about studio players. "The musicians in this community have the ability, all of them, to be what I call chameleons," says Zimmitti. "They can become anything for you." Dick Nash is famous for his ability to change colors at the drop of a baton. Says Kaplan admiringly, "He can emulate anybody." Several years ago, Nash was featured on a Time-Life series that recreated the big band hits. Nash's ability to recapture the original music note-by-note, nuance-by-nuance, blew away even his admirers.

Although L.A.'s top trombone players have the highest respect for each other's work,

# THE TOP TEN

Los Angeles-based studio trombone players (in alphabetical order) and the equipment they use:

## BILL BOOTH

Bach 16M medium-small bore tenor trombone played with a New York Bach 12C mouthpiece, Conn 8H large bore trombone (proto-type made in the 40's with a 7-7/8 bell) played with a Beversdorff mouthpiece copy by Giardinelli, Conn 62H bass trombone, Bach bass trumpet, Willson euphonium.

## BRUCE FOWLER

Yamaha YBL-691 tenor trombone played with a Bach 12C mouthpiece, Bach 36 medium-large bore tenor played with a Bach 6-1/2 AL mouthpiece, Yamaha YBL-612 bass trombone, Yamaha YEP-321 euphonium.

## ALEX ILES

King 2B tenor trombone (bell made in the mid-40's, inner slide made in the mid-50's, Jiggs Whigham light-weight outer slide) played with a New York Bach 11C mouthpiece, New York Bach 36 tenor trombone played with a Schilke 50 mouthpiece, Conn 88H large bore tenor played with a Schilke 51 mouthpiece, Yamaha YBL-613H bass trombone played with a Hauser mouthpiece (Harwood cup, P-60 back bore, IR rim), Yamaha YEP 321 euphonium.

## ALAN KAPLAN

King Jiggs Whigham small bore trombone played with a Bach 11C mouthpiece, Bach 36 medium-large bore trombone played with a Bach 6-1/2AL mouthpiece, Conn 62H bass trombone with a custom built slide by Larry Minick played with a Burt Herrick mouthpiece, Yamaha YEP-321 euphonium, Miraphone 186 tuba in Bb.

## CHARLIE LOPER

Bach 16M (medium-small bore), Bach 36 (medium-large bore), Bach 42 (Large bore) tenor trombones all played with Bach mouthpieces.

## LEW MCCREARY

Conn 6H small bore tenor trombone played with a Burt Herrick mouthpiece, Conn 88H large bore tenor trombone, Conn 62H bass trombone played with a Olds George Roberts SO mouthpiece, Conn euphonium.

## DICK NASH

Bach 16M (Watrous Model) medium-small bore tenor trombone with a King 3B hand slide crook, played with a brass copy of a Rhinehart 6A (originally a plastic) mouthpiece. Bach 42B large bore tenor trombone with a Conn 8H hand slide crook played with a Bach 6-1/2AL mouthpiece, Conn 72H single trigger bass trombone with a Denis Wick 2AL mouthpiece.

## BILL REICHENBACH

Conn 62H bass trombone played with a Minick L mouthpiece, Conn 32H medium-small bore (dual .500/.525) tenor trombone played with a Doug Elliot 100C mouthpiece, Conn 88H large bore tenor trombone played with a Doug Elliot 101G mouthpiece, Haag contra-bass trombone played with a Minick LX mouthpiece, Bach bass trumpet, Boosey and Hawkes Eb tuba, King euphonium.

## PHIL TEELE

Yamaha YBL-612 bass trombone (silver, made 20 years ago) played with a Minick L Glasel mouthpiece. Minick custom contra-bass trombone, Yamaha Compensating euphonium both played with a Minick 3 mouthpiece.

## LLOYD ULYATE

Bach 12 small bore tenor trombone played with a Bach 12C mouthpiece.



some friendly teasing is not out of the question. Dick Nash relates an anecdote that happened years back. George Roberts ("the world's greatest bass trombone player," according to Nash) had just left Los Angeles to play at one of the casinos in Tahoe. "That left the trombone area wide open," recalls Nash, "because he was the king. So I was called in for the pit band version of *West Side Story* with Bernstein. It was a two-two-two brass section—two trombones, two trumpets, two horns—which means that everyone had a very important part. I was playing the bass trombone part, and it was pretty taxing, very high and very low. Well, during a break, Vince de Rosa—the world's greatest French horn player—came over to me and Lloyd Ulyate, who was on the other trombone, and asked, 'So, do you miss George Roberts?'"

"I said, 'No, I'm playing more bass trombone than ever.'"

There was a pause, and then Lloyd

curity is just part of the deal. Everybody, if they don't get called for something that they thought they should have gotten called for, gets upset or worried. The fear element is there for everybody. It's just how you deal with it that's different."

"I've never heard of any trombone player blowing off another trombone player or ignoring him," asserts Alex Iles, who, at 36, is among the younger generation of successful studio trombone players. "It never feels like there's that 'clique' thing that people talk about. The adage I like is,

changes because the film got changed around. A big juggling act occurs where everybody tries to scramble and pick up other work that week. Those are the things that cause the tension."

Agrees Sandy DeCrescent, "It's very rare these days that composers get a locked film to score to." She puts much of the blame on Avid editing technology, which enables directors to keep re-cutting up to the very last minute.

Of course, the Avid isn't the first technological breakthrough to have an adverse



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**—L.A. contractor  
PATTI ZIMMITTI**

looked up with a deadpan expression and said, "That's why we miss George Roberts."

Can the studio trombone world really be one big mutual admiration society? What about the competitiveness for jobs? "There's always a level of competition," admits Kaplan, "and it's funny, I don't think anybody is totally secure. At any level, you still feel like you're just breaking in or trying to hang on. I don't know anybody who says, 'I've got it made. I'm cool.' The inse-

'It's not who you know, it's who knows you and how you play.' There are times when writers, composers, and arrangers have friends that they recommend for jobs to a contractor. But a lot of the times, the time-tested people, the names that come up consistently, come up for a reason. I don't think it's politics at all. Especially in the trombone world. The people who really have the staying power—the people who are doing studio work on a super-high level—they really do have the goods to back up what they do."

According to most studio insiders, the greatest source of tension among players is not competition, but the current trend toward last-minute re-editing of films. The resulting schedule changes can wreak havoc on musicians' lives. "A lot of times, says Iles, "they'll hire a 70 or 80-piece orchestra for a week's worth of double sessions, and all of a sudden—boom!—it

effect on the lives of studio musicians. In the late 1970s and early 80s, digital synthesizers began to replace studio orchestras on many television shows. Alan Kaplan recalls that when he first broke into television work, a large number of shows were scored every week. "My first TV show was *Hawaii 5-0* in 1976. This was before digital synth could emulate and replace instruments. It was just a sound effects machine at that time. Universal at that time had something like 11 weekly shows that used a small orchestra. Usually they had three or four trombones. And CBS had *Hawaii 5-0* plus one or two others. Within the same year or two there was Quinn Martin—remember them?—they had *Streets of San Francisco* and *Barnaby Jones*. Also Mike Post was doing a lot of stuff." Some current television shows, such as *Star Trek Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine*, still use studio orchestras, and many cartoons are scored each week; but the practice is



# Cracking Open the Studio Door

**F**or musicians hoping to break into studio work, the bad news is that there's no fast track. New players get on contractors' lists mainly on the recommendation of other players. That means aspiring studio trombonists have to make as many connections among their fellow trombone players as possible—not something you can do overnight. "It's very slow, very laborious," cautions Alex Iles. "People who try to beat down doors are often disappointed and frustrated. The people who do well are just real persistent in practicing, being available, and being able to cover whatever comes up."

The industry has changed in many ways since players like Dick Nash and Lloyd Ulyate got their starts. Nash arrived in Hollywood just as the studios were disbanding their house orchestras and going with freelance players. For Ulyate, the way in was through live television. But the need for players to make themselves available hasn't changed at all over the years. "Don't turn down anything," advises Ulyate, "because you never know who's going to be hearing you play, and the most important thing to get started in the business is the approval of your peers." Church jobs, weddings, quintets, big bands, rehearsal bands, concert bands, and community orchestras are all opportunities for expanding one's circle of musical acquaintances. Alan Kaplan got his first movie soundtrack gig when a contractor needed someone to come in right away to finish a job. "It was like, 'Get here NOW!'" he recalls. (Needless to say, he was there in no time flat.)

"Word gets around when you're a good player," states contractor Zimmitti. "In this community, there's this kind of invisible line. You get in line and wait your turn. That turn comes as things get busier and I can't get my regular guys. I'll talk to players and ask, 'Well, what about so-and-so?' Word of mouth has a lot to do with it." Just recently, for the first time ever, Sandy DeCrescent ran out of bass trombone players. "I had to call someone and say, 'Help!' He gave me the name of someone I didn't know, and that's who I got for the gig."

Making a recommendation is not something a musician takes lightly. "If I'm asked to recommend somebody," says Kaplan, "my reputation is on the line. I'm giving the contractor the benefit of my knowledge and my expertise. They're trusting me. So if I recommend somebody, I want it to be THE best player that I can think of for the job. That's what I use as my guide—'What does the job require?'—and then I give the best recommendation that I can."

"Many years ago," relates Zimmitti, "I was talking to a musician and I said, 'Listen, I got a tape from so-and-so, what do you think about this guy? Would you put him on a section of four or a section of six?' [The smaller the section, the more critical each player's role is.] He said, 'Oh, definitely a section of four.' I looked at him and said, 'That's cool with me, as long as you know that it's your ass on the section of four.' After the session was over, he came up to me and said, 'Make that a section of six.'"

much less prevalent than it used to be.

On movie soundtracks, the use of digital synth has been mostly limited to demos, although occasionally a soundtrack will be recorded on synth and sweetened with live playing. However, a more immediate threat is the growing number of films scores that are being recorded overseas. "A lot of films are scored in London," says DeCrescent. "We lose more to London than to everywhere else combined." Not that it's cheap—

**"One of the reasons I wanted to be a studio player is, when I was taking lessons with studio players, I saw they had houses, they had families, they weren't out on the road living in hotels."**

**—ALAN KAPLAN**

er up front to record there—in fact, it's usually more expensive to do so. Why, then, do producers go overseas? "It's a buyout," she explains. "No special payment, no payment for a CD. It's cheaper on the back end." The "special payment" that DeCrescent is referring to is the fee that union musicians get when the motion picture goes to video or is shown on TV. Union musicians also get a "new use" fee when their recording appears in a new medium, such as on CD or in a television commercial. Some productions skirt these payments by recording in Seattle or Salt Lake City, both of which have a pool of competent, non-union musicians.

As the market continues to shrink, more and more musicians are turning to doubling as way to increase their value—and their income. "I saw that writing on the wall when I first started," says Kaplan. "I took up bass trombone very early on, and it was a good thing, because, when I first got in, they were calling me to play third



trombone a lot. It was kind of the utility chair, and the contractors felt comfortable having a doubler sitting there because they didn't know up front if it was going to

**"Don't turn down anything, because you never know who's going to be hearing you play, and the most important thing to get started in the business is the approval of your peers."**  
—LLOYD ULYATE

require tenor or bass or both. It's probably more important than ever now, because now that everybody does it, the writers—particularly for movies, where the budgets

are bigger—are starting to feel that it gives them a bigger palette." Kaplan cautions that players who double have to "own" every instrument they play. "When you hit a note, you have to hit it whether it's your first instrument or your third. You can't afford to sound bad. There are no disclaimers," he adds.

Dick Nash agrees doubling can make a difference. "For the most part," he explains, "section players don't get over scale. But you can—I don't know if 'finagle' is the word—you can get a double if there's something technically low that's hard to play on tenor trombone. To make it facile, you might pick up the bass trombone and use the extra valve, the trigger, to get through some of the low parts. Doubling is fifty percent more than scale. A few of the guys in town have what they call a guaranteed double. They don't make over scale, but they get a guaranteed double."

"For us trombones," he continues, "for many years, if you were just a second or third player, you never got to double. Now a lot of the guys do get that—on the third

chair, they'll get [paid for] a tenor and bass trombone, even though they may play just one instrument. It's kind of accepted now for that chair. And we do play baritone horn—that's another double—although that's kind of rare."

Marsteller often gets calls for the unusual instruments he plays—instruments like bass trumpet, bass flugelhorn, ophicleide, and alp horn. He tells of a call he got several years ago from composer Jim Horner, who was looking for unusual sounds for the soundtrack of *Star Trek III*. "He asked me, 'Can you play a Tibetan temple horn?' I had no idea what one was, but it was two weeks of double sessions, so of course I said, 'Sure, I can play one of those.' Then I had to go find one." Marsteller eventually located a Tibetan import shop in Pasadena that had some horns in stock. But, he says, "it took me a couple of days of calling around and sweating bullets."

Never turning down a job, no matter how far-out, and doing whatever it takes to get the job done right—those are two of the essential mantras of a successful studio musician. **WP**

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