

# Doc Severinsen talks to Jens Lindemann



**The Brass Herald is hugely honoured to publish an exclusive interview with the mighty and world-famous Doc Severinsen in this issue. The interview was conducted by trumpet star Jens Lindemann when these two magnificent trumpet players were together in Florida in April. Commencing in this issue, future parts will be published in August and October. The Brass Herald would like to place on record much gratitude to Doc and Jens for making this happen.**

**JL:** Good afternoon Doc, thanks for taking time out and agreeing to this interview for *The Brass Herald*.

**DS:** It's my pleasure Jens.

**JL:** Let's start at the beginning. Who was your first trumpet teacher?

**DS:** My father, who was a dentist and amateur violin player in eastern Oregon where I grew up. Even though he didn't play professionally, he always knew where the 'music' was...it was uncanny. He played violin and the last thing I heard every day before going to sleep was the *Caprice Viennois* by Fritz Kreisler and if he didn't play it, I would ask for it. He had me practising the violin but I wasn't responding to it so he asked me what I wanted to play and I said the trombone. My father pointed out that I was too small and couldn't reach all the positions (I was seven at the time), so instead he gave me a gold-plated Buescher peashooter cornet with a teeny French Horn-like mouthpiece. I was also attracted to the Peckhorn (E flat alto horn) and would sneak into my neighbour's house and blow that thing in the closet and get in as many licks as I could because eventually I knew they would find me and come take me away. My neighbour also had an old army bugle around and it didn't have a mouthpiece so I just started on that by playing without one. This same neighbour later became governor of the state of Oregon, so in summers I would be practicing at the governor's mansion and then it was back to the outhouse in the fall!

All the lessons with my father were violin lessons on the trumpet. He would choose pieces that were beyond what I was

capable of playing and he simply drilled me as though they were violin solos. Violin and voice were the key ingredients. There was no such thing as how to attack a note on the trumpet or how to slur from note to note, he talked strictly in the parlance of the violin



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**JL:** Did you enter any solo competitions as a kid?

**DS:** I had been entered into the state junior trumpet competition when I was nine and the trumpet was half as tall as I was. In those days you got first, second, third or go home and practise. Actually, I won! In fact, the judge was Herbert L. Clarke.

**JL:** Did you get to speak with him?

**DS:** Yes I did. I have two specific memories of that time just to show you how naive I was. He said: "I want to get together with you tonight to do some cornet playing" and I said: "Well Mr. Clarke I can't do that,

I have to go to the movies because we don't have a theatre back where I live!" The other thing I remember was that when I got back to my home town somebody asked me: "Well little Doc, you won the contest, how does that feel?" and I said: "Pretty good, but how do you like my new shoes!"

My father asked me what I wanted after the contest and that's what I got. I did two more state contests after that which I won. I played Del Steiger's *Carnival of Venice* when I was eleven. It wasn't even on the list and my father said: "I don't care, if they don't want to give you a prize that's their problem." Then I went on to win a national contest playing Frank Simon's *Willow Echoes* a couple of years later and I figured I'd better quit while I was ahead.

**JL:** Your father sounded like a nurturing influence.

**DS:** Yes and my mother was the pusher. She found me at home one day laying on the couch and demanded to know why I wasn't practising. Well I told her that Mr. Clarke told me to rest as much as I played. Of course, I don't really think that's exactly what he meant but it felt like a pretty good excuse at the time.

**JL:** What was there left to do after being such a seasoned contest veteran at the age of eleven?

**DS:** I started playing at country dances. In fact, I started that when I was seven. So in my early teens I played these dances that would start at nine at night and finish at three in the morning with only a 30 minute break...and I got 50 cents. I thought: "Wow, I didn't know it was this easy

to make money!"

**JL:** I guess there was no union steward at those gigs?

**DS:** It was during the Great Depression and 50 cents looked pretty big to most everybody.

**JL:** Now in your early teens, what was the next step?

**DS:** Well, when I was fourteen I met Tommy Dorsey. They didn't tell him I wasn't sixteen yet and he asked me: "What have you got in the case?" I said: "My cornet." Well he asked to see it and then proceeded to play *Bride of the Waves* from

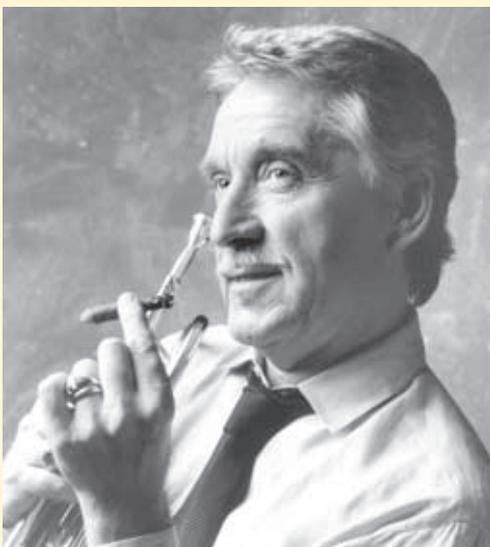


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beginning to end - I was dumbfounded. Ziggy Elman was also in the band and they would open their set with *Well Git It*. Ziggy was easily the loudest trumpet player who may have ever lived and when I first heard him play that tune I knew that this is what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. So Tommy said: "You go back and work on your horn and we'll meet up again later." Well we did a few years later and I toured all over the world with him. For a brass player, working with Tommy Dorsey was a great experience. He had maybe the best brass embouchure I've ever seen and I learned a lot from watching him.

**JL:** So what was it about Tommy Dorsey's embouchure that seemed to make it so unique?

**DS:** Well, it was flat and against his face. It



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was effortless. He had a way of playing where he didn't smile or push it out. It was a very strong setting in the corners and no matter what he played, loud or soft, high or low, it never changed...always the same setting. He could control a brass instrument like no one I've ever heard. We would play some swing thing and he would wipe out the whole band even though we had some very loud players.

**JL:** Did you ever have any embouchure problems?

**DS:** Yes I did. When I put the trumpet up for the first time, I had no embouchure problems at all because I didn't know what to think. I had no thought processes about it. I started playing in a big band on my cornet with three other trumpets in the section. I was the featured soloist playing *Melancholy Baby* and I

noticed that I could notch up with the section and get better high notes if I would just put the mouthpiece on with less top lip and down to the left. All of a sudden my high notes started to improve but a few weeks in, I couldn't play a note at all. Fortunately, it was around graduation time from high school and while sending papers back and forth to my teachers, I didn't play for around six weeks. When I came back it went right back to a natural place, but I've had a bugaboo about it ever since.

**JL:** What advice would you give younger and older players who are going through questions of what to do with the embouchure?

**DS:** Well, I would say choose your repertoire wisely and try to be reasonable about what is comfortable. Playing the trumpet is not really the most comfortable thing because it's not natural. My advice would be not to obsess about the embouchure if there isn't really a problem. If there is, then do something about it and seek advice. But be very, very careful of who you go to because people can come up with some wild solutions and usually that's the end of the player. They'll often put them on a mouthpiece that's too big in every way and are just desperate to help and may try desperate things that will only further confuse the student.

**JL:** Did you ever work with a trumpet teacher?

**DS:** I was lucky. I went to Benny

Baker in New York who was my only other teacher...I was about 20 now. He was also the first trumpet teacher for Michael Sachs, now the principal trumpet in the Cleveland Orchestra. I set up the Arban Characteristic Study No.1 and I was getting all ready, licking my lips and fiddling with the mouthpiece position and he said: "What in the hell are you doing? By the time you get it on there your mouth is going to be so tensed up you're not going to be able to play anything. Just lick your lips, set it on there and hold it...don't move an inch until I give you a downbeat like a conductor and then just play a note you like." The note that came out was an instant attack and a beautiful sound and it was comfortable and I kind of got the point. By the way, we rarely talked about embouchure or anything technical. We talked about music and if you were doing that correctly, most everything would be in the right place anyway. He pointed out that what he was trying to teach me was tension and relaxation. I might call it support and relaxation now. He said it was just like an athlete, like watching Babe Ruth hit one out of the park. In order to perform the function you had to have total relaxation in certain areas of your body and complete support or tension in a neighbouring part. It looks effortless with an athlete because they have perfect muscular control. Tension and relaxation...it's never tension and tension or relaxation and relaxation. He said you have to stop looking for the perfect mouthpiece spot. Just throw it up there, tense the corners and relax the centre of the embouchure. He said: "You'll know it's right because your attack will be instantaneous and you will come right smack into the middle of the tone, not chipping from above or sliding in from below. You will have more control from



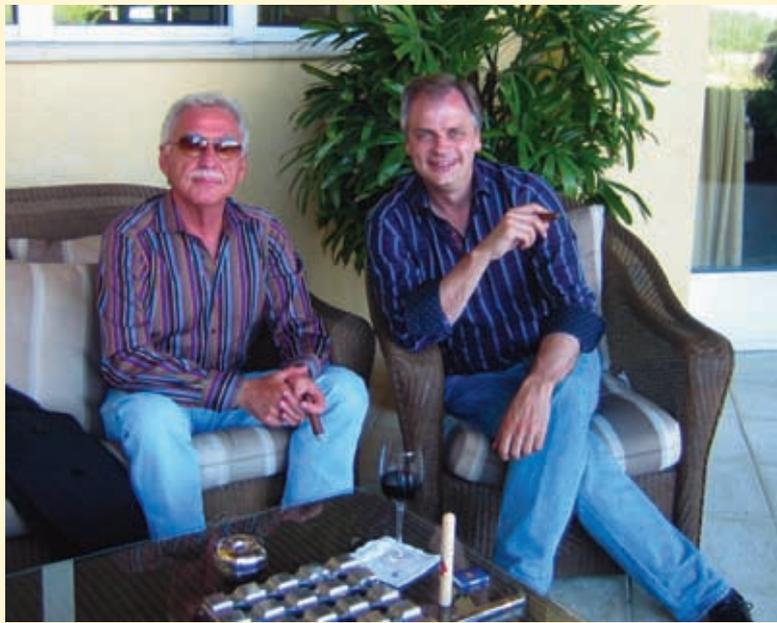
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loud to soft and when you want to go higher, keep your corners in place, don't stretch anything and raise the tongue, when you want to go down, lower the tongue." He never talked about what syllables to use because I guess he figured I would find out for myself. You will also notice that after playing correctly, after awhile you will get a good tingling sensation in the lips. He was right on every count. My improvement was instantaneous and we were just able to concentrate on music. I said to him one day: "Don't you think we should talk about breathing?" He said: "Listen schmuck, if I needed to talk about breathing don't you think I would have mentioned it by now...you're doing fine so shut-up and play the trumpet!"

**JL:** End of lesson?

**DS:** Yup, he happened to have been in a good mood that day!

**JL:** Doc, considering that you are the consummate player in every sense from virtuoso technique, to lead playing, to improvisation - the ultimate cross-over



**Doc Severinsen and Jens Lindemann relaxing together in Florida**

player before there ever was such a term - what are your general thoughts about mouthpiece choice for all-around playing?

**DS:** Something medium is always the best choice. Using some basic industry terminology for size, I would say somewhere around a Bach 5C. That's not too big and not too small and you can do about everything you need to do on it. My rule of thumb has always been to play the

smallest mouthpiece possible to get the results that you need. I think a lot of guys get these big mouthpieces because it cuts down their production. They can't produce as much tone and symphony conductors like that. Conductors like to put their hands in the face of the trumpets even in a Mahler symphony at points where it might be entirely appropriate to play out. Don't ever assume a conductor knows too much...or anything!

**JL:** Doc, you are famous for the number of mouthpieces you supposedly have that would fill a bathtub...what is the actual tally?

**DS:** If I hadn't thrown away the first 500, I'd have around 1,000 now!

**In the August issue, the 'Doc' will be talking to Jens about The Big Band era, The Tonight Show and beyond...**

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Gewerbepark 22  
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Germany  
Tel.: +49 (0)37 422 - 452 80  
Fax: +49 (0)37 422 - 452 14  
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