

Glenn Ferris: The Taming of the Slide

by Mike Zwerin

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Paris: When a youthful Glenn Ferris introduced himself to Freddie Hubbard, saying, "I'm a trombone player," the trumpet star instinctively replied: "That's tough." The acrobatic manipulation necessary to play the slide trombone is not considered "sexy."

The process of becoming a creator rather than a bone-for-hire is coming together for Ferris. So far this year he is leader or co-leader on five new albums; and on October 31st he will begin a ten-day "carte blanche" at the Sunset, a premier Paris club, presenting five of his formations. Following Dickie Wells, Jack Teagarden, J.J. Johnson, Kai Winding, Jimmy Knepper and a handful of others, the 51-year-old Ferris has become one of the rare ones to have tamed that demon slide. He is as fluent as a cellist. He struck one critic as "the Stan Getz of the trombone." Another said, "he sings more than he blows." The instrument remains an oddity. Beginners are not attracted to it. There is not one trombonist among the 42 students in the jazz department of the National Conservatory of Music, where he is a professor.

Ferris had pretty much exhausted Los Angeles-based trombone-gig possibilities during the '70s, working with, among others, Stevie Wonder, the Beach Boys, the Brecker Brothers, Tim Buckley, Harry James, Art Pepper, the Average White Band, James Taylor, Billy Cobham, George Duke, Buddy Miles, Don Ellis and Frank Zappa's Mothers Of Invention. So he moved to New York. In the process he left some family problems behind. It turned out to be only a pit-stop on the road to Paris. In 1980, he came over playing Caribbean music with the Haitian band Tabou Combo.

They worked hot and grinding Antillais dances in the Salle Wagram, going pretty much non-stop from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. After hearing him one night, the leader of Galaxy, a successful Paris-based group from Guadalupe,

offered him a guaranteed salary and an apartment to play and arrange for them. It was an offer he could not refuse.

At the beginning, he went to the movies alone a lot. At the same time, he was enchanted by the tradition and the romance involved with being a jazzman in Paris. Being one of the few world-class trombonists living in Western Europe, he was soon traveling to Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Italy, Spain and even to Japan as viable sideman, reliable substitute and guest star. Now he has become a leader earning his living playing his own music. The odds against such success are long; witness the current rage of trombone-jokes.

What is the height of optimism? A trombonist with a beeper. What is the difference between a frog and a trombone player crossing a road? The frog has a gig. A few days after a trombonist's car is stolen with his horn in the trunk, the police call to say they found it. Praying that his horn is still there, he rushes to pick it up. He opens the trunk with great trepidation, and sees -- two trombones.

Werner Aldinger, Ferris's German producer for the Munich-based Enja records, is also a practicing trombonist. "How else can a trombone player get a record contract?" he jokes. With enough talent, study and desire, any improvising instrumentalist can become a sort of instant one-man composer. Jazz is the most democratic of musics. Ferris teaches the difference between creation and execution to 25 young classically-trained musicians ("they sure play in tune") in his "introduction to jazz" class in the conservatory ("the Julliard of Paris," he calls it).

He would like to see his instrument accepted as a valid means of expression like the trumpet or the saxophone: "People don't want to hear the players fighting their slides. Other instruments don't have that problem. The audience becomes too conscious that you are playing a 'difficult' instrument. People just want to be carried away by music." Despite all the improved communication in the global village, and no matter how good or successful you are, in this business the price of residing in Europe remains being unknown in the U.S. Ferris never even reaches the lower rungs of polls in American trade magazines. Asked if it bothers him, he replies: "Let's just say that I find the degree to which I am unspoken-of over there rather extreme."