Reprints from the

International Trumpet Guild® Journal

to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet

Joe Wilder: Overcoming Obstacles with Grace and Integrity

By Keith Winking

March 2007 • Page 25

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It can be dangerous to equate a musician's persona with his style of playing. In the case of Joe Wilder, however, the warmth, lyricism, humor, and sophistication of his music are an extension of the man himself. Just mention his name to almost any professional musician in both the jazz and classical worlds and you're sure to get a smile and a testimonial—not only to Joe's musical talents, but also to his sterling personal qualities. In fact, Wilder's sense of propriety is almost as legendary as his musical prowess. One long-time associate recalls that when Joe was in Lionel Hampton's orchestra in the early 1940s, fellow band members used to offer him a ten-dollar bill if he would simply utter one four-letter word. Joe never collected!

Wilder has accomplished just about everything one can accomplish in music—from big bands to bebop, classical concertos to commercials. And if he hasn't enjoyed the same success in bringing his name before the general public, this failing is only a result of his modesty and self-effacing nature. Nevertheless, his belief in himself enabled him to avoid the pitfalls that claimed so many of his musical generation and to open doors that he was told he could never enter. (Ed Berger, associate director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University)

Winking: *What can you tell us about your early life?*

Wilder: I was born on February 22, 1922, in Colwyn, Pennsylvania, a little township outside of Philadelphia. There were I think six black families living there which included my paternal and maternal grandparents as well as aunts and uncles. It was really a small hamlet and when you walked four blocks, you were in Philadelphia.

Winking: *Do you come from a musical family?*

Wilder: My father was a musician but he did not come from a musical family and I never found out why he became a musician. He started on cornet and played *Inflamattus* at the church when he was young. My father studied with Frederick D. Griffin, a fine cornet soloist who performed solos from the Arban and things of that nature. Mr. Griffin also taught trombone, piano, and other instruments as well. During one lesson Griffin asked my father if he would like to try the sousaphone. After fooling around with the instrument my father fell in love with it so he quit cornet and started playing full time. The sousaphone double at that time was the bass violin so my father bought a bass and started taking lessons with one of the guys in the Philadelphia Orchestra. He became very proficient at both instruments and got a lot of work due to the fact that he owned both and could double.

My father served in both WWI and WWII and he started his own group "Six Bits of Rhythm" when he got out of the Navy after WWII. He also played with the Leroy Bostic Band, the most successful black society band in Philadelphia.

Joe Wilder

Winking: *When did you start playing?*

Wilder: I was around eleven when I started on cornet. It was my father's idea and I had not really even thought about becoming a musician. At that time though, my paternal grandparents lived across the street from a Catholic school. They had a marching band that I liked. I would have picked the trombone if I had had a choice. My father got a Holton cornet… I started on that and played for a long time.

Winking: *Did you study with your father?*

Wilder: No, I started out with one of the guys my father worked with named Henry Lowe who played second or third trumpet in some of the dance bands. I studied with Mr. Lowe for just a few months and then started lessons with Mr. Griffin, my father's old teacher who was a wonderful teacher.

L – R: Joe Wilder, Keith Winking, Raymond Crisara

Winking: *Were you playing in a school band at the time?*

Wider: No, I was just taking lessons. The first time I played in public was in elementary school. On one of the national holidays, the principal who knew I played cornet decided I should play taps in the hallway.

Around that same time, my father started bringing home trumpet parts to some of the stock charts from the dance bands he was playing with. He would teach me the melodies in the first trumpet parts and have me practice them until he felt that I could play them comfortably. I then auditioned for a black children's radio program sponsored by Parisian Tailors of Philadelphia who made all of the uniforms for the big name black orchestras such as Jimmy Lunceford, Don Redmon, Fletcher Henderson, Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, and Duke Ellington. At that time, there was a national radio program sponsored by Horn and Hardart's on every Sunday featuring children. They never had black children on that show so Eddie Lieberman, who was the chief cutter for Parisian Tailors, suggested to Mr. Kessler, the company's owner, that they start a black children's radio program. The show was on Sunday mornings for an hour and it featured singers, tap dancers and occasionally you would have a kid play violin. I remember Percy Heath (jazz bassist) playing violin on the show.

> "Armstrong was very encouraging and gave me a pass to come watch him play every day. I was twelve at the time…"

Winking: *Where was the show held?*

Wilder: We performed in the Lincoln Theater in Philadelphia. At the time, big bands were not allowed to work in clubs on Sundays due to the Blue Laws, so all of the big bands that played the Lincoln Theater—Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, etc.—had in their contract that they had to support the children on Sundays by improvising backgrounds for whatever we were doing. We got to know all of these top-notch musicians and they paid attention to me since I was playing a cornet.

Winking: *What kinds of things were you playing then?*

Wilder: I was playing the first trumpet part to some of the stock charts my father brought home. There was no improvisation and at the time I did not even know what that was. The big bands would provide backgrounds and if the big band musicians were not available, there was a fine pianist named Ruth Mosely who would accompany us.

Winking: *What were some of the groups you got to play with?*

Wilder: Groups like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and Earl Hines… I was not really that familiar with those musicians/bands then but my father definitely knew who they were. Louis Armstrong was there with the Louie Russell band and he saw me perform. At the time, they called me "Little Louie," not because I played like him, but due to the fact that I was playing cornet. Armstrong was very encouraging and gave me a pass to come watch him play every day. I was twelve at the time and I liked his playing but I was working out of the Arban book and wanted to play like Del Staigers, so I was not really that interested in coming to see him play every day.

That was around 1933 – 34. I did this until I was around fifteen years old. At that time I was also playing in my junior high school orchestra where I sat next to one of my oldest friends, Rosario Pino, who recently passed away. Rosario and I attended William B. Tilden Junior High School together which was during the Depression. At times, my family had no food and oftentimes Rosario would invite me home for meals and this would be the only meal I might have had in two days. His father bought him a brand new Blessing cornet, and because I was first chair, Rosario, who had a heart of gold, let me play his beautiful instrument. At the time I was playing a Holton cornet so it was a big thing for me to play a brand new instrument.

Winking: *What did you do after junior high school?*

Wilder: I took an audition at Penn University for the Mastbaum School in Philadelphia. Alberta Schenbecker, who was a pianist and a very talented teacher at Tilden, arranged the audition for me. She was the youngest teacher in the Philadelphia school system and looked like one of the students. I passed my audition and was accepted into the Mastbaum School. She eventually married Paul Lewis and whatever success I had from this point on could be attributed to her.

Winking: *What kind of school was Mastbaum?*

Wilder: It was a vocational school basically. They taught carpentry and all kinds of things but music was what made them famous. There were some tremendous student musicians there at that time. Ralph Shapey, who became a well-known avant garde composer in California, others included people like Leon Cohen, Buddy DeFranco, and Red Rodney. They had an exceptional symphonic band conducted by Russ Wyre who had been a tuba player with the St. Louis Symphony. The

Mastbaum School emphasized classical training… if you played jazz, your name was mud. At that time, Tommy Dorsey was touring the country holding a youth jazz contest and if you won you got to tour with his band for a month. Buddy DeFranco won the contest in Philadelphia and got to tour with the band and when he came back to school, he was treated like a bum by the people who ran the school.

> "The Mastbaum School emphasized classical training… if you played jazz, your name was mud."

Winking: *Did you have a trumpet teacher at Mastbaum?*

Wilder: No, I was still studying with Mr. Griffin. I was supposed to have a teacher there but we could not afford it. I was there for two years. I did not graduate and left school when I went on the road with Les Hite's band. It came about because I was playing with the Jimmy Gorham band in Philadelphia. There were guys in that band who would transcribed tunes note for note from the records of bands like Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, and Fletcher Henderson and the band played them just like the famous bands. It was very popular in Philadelphia. I got connected with the Gorham band because my father was a friend of Jimmy Gorham.

Winking: *When did you make the transition from wanting to play like Del Staigers and Arban material to playing dance band music?*

Wilder: I was still studying classical music at Mastbaum but working in dance bands at the same time. I wasn't really thinking about playing in a symphony orchestra at that time… all I wanted to do was play as well as somebody I had heard whose playing I admired. It did not even really occur to me that Del Staigers was a classical/concert soloist… I just enjoyed the way he played.

Winking: *Were you improvising then?*

Wilder: No, when I went with Les Hite, I was playing lead. At Mastbaum I became proficient at sight reading and when I joined Les Hite, we only rehearsed for about three days so I had to sight read a lot of the music on the bandstand. Britt Woodman, who was first trombonist with Les Hite and eventually Duke Ellington, never got over that and used to tell folks how I came into the band and sight-read everything they had. I didn't play in their style, but I played all the notes. That was around 1941. I don't think I was there for a full year. Dizzy joined the Les Hite band about this time. Dizzy had been working with Cab Calloway and was let go due to an altercation with Cab. Dizzy was always a prankster and during a radio show someone in the band shot a spitball at the drummer and it missed and hit Cab in the neck. Cab assumed that it was Dizzy so he let him go.

> "Dizzy was always a prankster…"

With Les Hite, Dizzy did not want to play lead so he played second and I played first. With all of the experience Dizzy had, he never threw his weight around. He would offer suggestions as to how to play certain things which was great for me and we got along extremely well. Everyone thinks that the Les Hite Band was the first time Dizzy and I met, but Dizzy played with my father in Philadelphia with the Frankie Fairfax band, and that is where we first met.

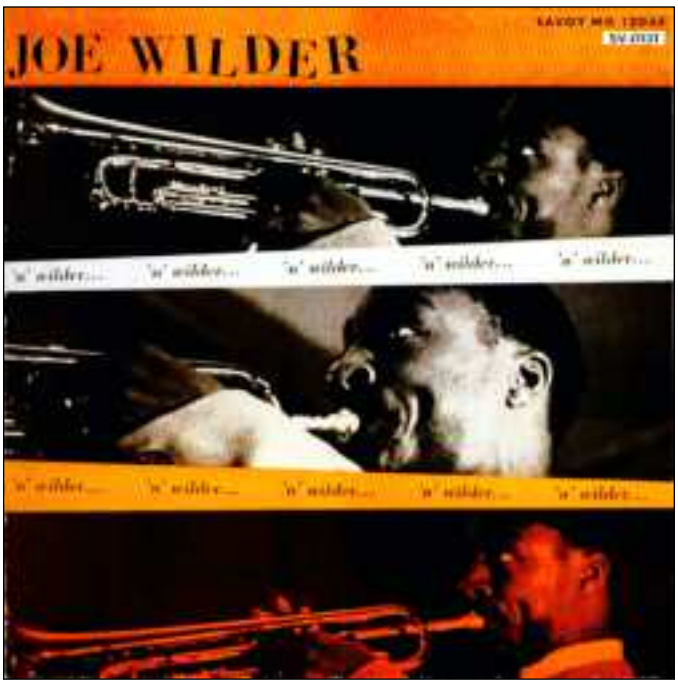
Winking: *Why did you leave Les Hite?*

Wilder: We were playing at the Howard Theater in Washington D.C. and part of the show, Les used to do a dance with his back to the band. Dizzy was imitating his every move and since Les' back was to the band, he did not see this going on. Every time Les would turn around to conduct the band, Dizzy would sit down and sat there looking like a saint. The audience was applauding and laughing and Les thought it was for him because he had been out there dancing. This went on for three or four days but then on the fifth day, Les turned around quicker then usual and Dizzy had not sat down yet so he caught him. Les got so mad that when we finished playing that evening he said, "Everybody, two weeks notice! That's it, you're all out of here." When the time came to get paid at the end of the week, he told everyone "That notice does not apply to you. I'm just trying to get rid of Dizzy."

In the meantime, word had gotten out that Les had fired the band and Lionel Hampton was looking for someone to fill in for Karl George, his first trumpeter while he was away so I was hired. Fred Norman was writing arrangements for the band and had written an arrangement on *I Left my Heart at the Stage Door Canteen* and he wrote it in the key of E. Karl was a wonderful first trumpet player but he had difficulty playing in certain keys so when he came back he passed this chart on to me. Lionel asked Fred Norman why I was playing lead and he said, "Because Karl can't read the part." So Lionel kept me on and I ended staying on longer then I was supposed to. I was in Hampton's band for about a year and while there, I had to take my physical for the service for WWII.

Winking: *When did you go in the service?*

Wilder: When I was touring with Lionel Hampton, I changed my draft board registration site from Philadelphia to Los Angeles, which gave me a few extra months. Back then, the draft board kept close tabs on everyone. Lionel was on the road and we were going back to Philadelphia, so when I got back home, there was a notice for me to appear at the local draft board. I joined the Marines in April of 1943. When I was



drafted I was going to be placed in the Army, Navy, or possibly the Coast Guard. While talking with the draft board, the guy said they were not accepting any more non-combatants and needed fighting people so I would have go to infantry. He mentioned that they were just beginning to accept black Marines and since the Army was not accepting any more musicians I thought if I was going to have to fight anyway, it seemed like a good move to join the Marines.

I was stationed at Montford Point on Camp LeJeune in North Carolina. The base was segregated so we had a rough time down there. I was in an all-black unit but the officers and non-commissioned officers were all white. After boot camp, I was placed in a Special Weapons Unit. Bobby Troupe (pianist/singer, actor, composer of *Route 66*) was a second lieutenant and a morale officer there. He told the commandant that there was a guy in Special Weapons who had played in several name bands and he thought I might be an asset to morale if I was placed in the band so I was transferred to the band. We had a dance band within the military band and we used to play for the officers on Saturdays.

The Bandmaster was Paul Jackson and his assistant was George Dowdy. They were both career Marines. I became the assistant bandmaster at the suggestion of Paul Jackson and when I became the assistant George Dowdy lost out and was transferred overseas. George was from deep rural Mississippi and had a hard time with some of the fellows in my unit because they assumed, due to where he was from and his accent, that he was prejudiced. They would ridicule him due to his southern drawl. I did not agree with this so I would defend him. All of the training we received as members of a military band was attributable to Paul B. Jackson and to some extent George Dowdy. They were both very nice.

I was able to get through this time because of guys like Bobby Troupe and Allen Luther, my platoon leader. They went out of their way to lessen the discrimination we were facing on the base. We did not have a theater on base so movies were shown in the mess hall and the black marines were limited to the two rows of seats in the very back of the hall. We were continually fighting the inequities created by segregation but these officers did everything they could to see that we were treated like all of the other Marines.

There is an interesting thing that happened then which I want to share. Dutch soldiers, who had been fighting the Germans, came to on Camp Lejeune to learn new combat techniques that the U.S. Marines employed. The Dutch were stationed with the whites on Hadnot Point and the Marines were making disparaging remarks about the Queen and making fun of the Dutch in general. They were fighting each other like crazy so finally the commander wanted to fix the Dutch good so he put them at Montford Point along with the black Marines. He thought if they don't get along with the white Marines that there was no way they would get along with the black Marines. We developed a friendship so strong that even when they had a couple of days leave and could go off base they would stay with us

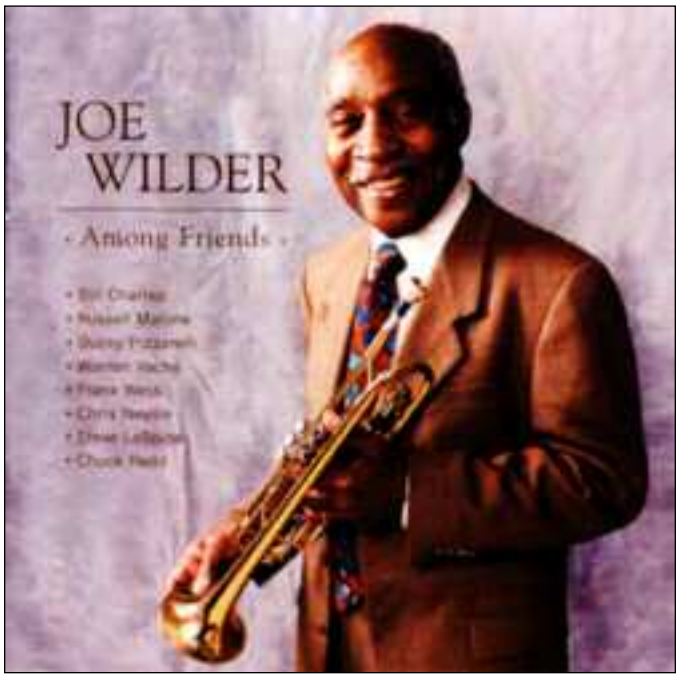
I left the service in April of 1946. They had a rule back then that you could go back to the job you had prior to your time in the service so I went back to Lionel Hampton's Band. I stayed in the band this time for just a few months and then I joined Jimmy Lunceford's Band. Gil Fuller, who was writing for Earl Hines, heard me play with Jimmy Gorham earlier so when there was an opening with the Lunceford Band he recommended me.

Winking: *Were you playing solos at this time or still playing lead?*

Wilder: I played some solos. The first solo I ever recorded was *I'll Remember You* with the Les Hite Band. There were two things on that record. One was the *Jersey Bounce* and Dizzy played a solo on that, and *I'll Remember You* was on the other side.

I was playing lead with the Lunceford Band but I have to qualify that because I was basically playing the ensemble lead parts. There were other fellows who played the extremely high parts. I was with that band for about five months. Jimmy died of a heart attack fairly soon after I joined and we were in Seaside, Oregon, when that happened. After he died, Eddie Wilcox and Joe Thomas co-led the band and we then went back to New York playing the Savoy Ballroom and places like that.

I then joined the Lucky Milligan Band for a short while, and while I was with Lucky, I got a call to go in and play the Diamond Horseshoe with Noble Sissle. The Diamond Horseshoe was in New York on 46th street between Eighth and Broadway. I stayed with that band for a couple of months and then I got a call to play a Broadway show. It was called *Alive and Kicking* featuring Carl Reiner, David Burns, and Jack Guilford. When I got that call they wanted me to start right away which meant that I did not have time to give the required two weeks notice to Mr. Sissle. I spoke with Mr. Sissle and told him about the call and explained how if I took the job there was not enough time to give notice. I asked if there was any possibility if I could do it and he said, "You know young man, there are no Negro musicians playing in the Broadway shows. Maybe it would be a good idea to let you go to see what happens. I'll let you go, but if you are gone for more then four weeks I'll have to get a permanent replacement for you." The show ran for seven weeks and he still let me come back. I was back for four or five weeks when I got a call for another Broadway show so I had to go through the same routine with Mr. Sissle. He said,



"Okay, but this time after four weeks that is it. You can't come back." That show was the original *Guys and Dolls* and it ran for three years. In addition to myself, they also hired pianist Billy Kyle and trombonist Benny Morton and this might have been the first time there were three black musicians playing a Broadway show. I am grateful to Noble Sissle for allowing me to do this.

Winking: *There were no African-American musicians playing shows then?*

Wilder: On occasion, if it was a black show, black musicians would play in the pit orchestra but never if it was a white show. After *Guys and Dolls* I started subbing on other shows, and that led to a call to play *Silk Stockings* by Cole Porter. Before I was hired they approached Cole Porter to ask if he had any objections to having a black first trumpet player and he asked if I could play his music. They told him yes, and he said that is all that mattered. This was the first time an African-American musician was hired to play a principal chair with a Broadway show. At the time, the excuse for not hiring blacks was that the show would have to travel through the South and the company did not want to deal with the problems that came with that. I did *Silk Stockings,* featuring Don Ameche, for about a year and a half and then was called to play Frank Loesser's *Most Happy Fellow*.

Winking: *What was the environment like for you at that time?*

Wilder: For the most part, the musicians were very nice especially the brass and reed players. The string players were not always as welcoming but the folks who were worse than them were the stagehands. Many of them were like a faction of the Ku Klux Klan. I can't generalize though because there were also some very nice guys too. Wherever I have gone, if it had not been for the nice guys, this whole thing would have come to a halt, where I was concerned.

Winking: *Were you still playing club dates at that time?*

Wilder: I was doing some but they were very strict at that time about taking off from a show to do other work.

I got a call in 1954 to play with Basie and I went to Europe with him. At that time, Basie had three trumpets and Joe Newman was doing all of the solos. He was complaining to Basie about being overworked so Basie hired me to play some of the solos. I remember we rehearsed at Birdland and Joe Newman was handing me some of the parts, all of which had solos and I was getting excited. We did not rehearse those charts and at the end of the rehearsal I mentioned to Marshall Royal, lead alto player, how great it was that Joe was giving me so many solos. When Marshall looked at the charts he commented, "We haven't played those charts in ten years."

During the tour I was getting frustrated because I was not getting any solos. We were playing in Götheberg, Sweden, so I wrote a note and passed it down through the reed section asking them to give it to Mr. Basie. He opened the note and he looked up at me and said "You want to play, *play!"* What I had written is "Can I just play eight bars of anything!" and signed it "The trumpet player, second from the drums." He thought it was funny, but not at first. He told me that he was not aware that he had not let me play so from that point on he let me play solos.

Winking: *How long were you with Basie?*

Joe Wilder in the studio

Wilder: I was only in that band for about four months but everyone thinks I was in there for years because they get me confused with Joe Newman.

Winking: *Weren't you also going to the Manhattan School of Music at that time?*

Wilder: I finished my bachelor's degree in 1953 and was working on my master's when Basie called in 1954. At that time, I did not feel like my playing was rounded enough and I wanted to work on my classical playing. I was working on my degrees while playing on Broadway and doing most of my studying while working in the pit. Some of the gaps with the dialogue on stage were such that you could have read a whole novel in the pit. I studied with Joseph Alessi who was Toscanini's first trumpet player when he first came to the states and I also studied orchestral literature with William Vacchiano. They were both very nice to me.

> "…they approached Cole Porter to ask if he had any objections to having a black first trumpet player and he asked if I could play his music… he said that is all that mattered."

Winking: *What did the Manhattan School think about you working on Broadway?*

Wilder: They tolerated Broadway but they did not like jazz. I auditioned for the Manhattan Symphony Orchestra several times and the conductor did not like anybody that had anything to do with jazz. It was the "devil's music" and he was not going to have any part of it. After my auditions he would tell me that what I did was okay but that "we don't really play in a symphony orchestra with that concept." One day the first trumpeter was not there at the start of a rehearsal so they called me in to play for him. We started playing and the conductor stopped in the middle of some piece and gave me that same routine. By then, I had enough so I said, "If I am not playing the concept you like, before you criticize me why don't you tell me the way you would like me to play it. And then if I don't play it the way you want, you are free to say that I can't do it

and that will be the end of it. You criticize me before I have even had a chance to play it and I don't know what style you want me to play." He said, "Really!" and then he went to the Dean's office and had me removed. He eventually got a Fulbright to go work in England and they replaced him with Jonel Perlea from La Scala Opera who was really a wonderful conductor.

After Maestro Perlea arrived, they held trumpet auditions behind a curtain and they seemed to like what I did, so they gave me the principal chair. One humorous incident occurred while playing the *Leonore Overture*. I wanted to impress the conductor so when the time came for the trumpet solo I played strong and he was standing up there shaking his head and said, "No, this can't be right." He started again and I wondered what I had done wrong and figured maybe I had not played loud enough so when the solo came again, I played louder. He stopped again and said that it was still not right and asked if he could see the music. As I was about to hand the music up to him the second trumpet player leaned over and said, "Joe, it's trumpet in E-flat." At that point the conductor was halfway though the orchestra. I asked if I could have one more chance since I thought I now knew what was wrong. It went fine and he said, "This is correct."

> "With studio work, you never knew what you were going to play when you went to work so it was very interesting."

Winking: *How did you get started at ABC?*

Wilder: While I was playing *Most Happy Fellow* on Broadway I got a call to see if I would be interested in subbing over at ABC. I subbed quite a bit and was eventually asked if I would be interested in being on staff if they had an opening. I told them I was and I then got a call saying that ABC had a new show coming in and the usual run is seven weeks so I was told that I could get seven weeks of work. I said yes. At that time, a lot of guys did not want to be on staff or playing Broadway shows since they thought it was the end of the music business.

I started at ABC around 1957 and was there for about seventeen years. I was there for almost two years as a substitute and had it not been for Billy Butterfield I would have not been there at all. Billy was doing what was called a "script show" which was a soap opera. Bobby Hackett was playing cornet for that show and was also the leader writing arrangements. He had a root canal on his front tooth and as a result could not play at all so they hired Billy Butterfield, who was on staff, to play for Bobby. Billy wanted to take off to play some job for a lot more money so ABC told him it was okay if he could find someone to cover for him. Billy and I had worked together on a couple of record dates and he liked the way I played and said if he ever got a chance to throw something my way, he would do it. About a month after he said that to me is when he called me to sub for him at ABC. Billy told me to go in and do the rehearsal and then the show on the air. So when I went in this very dignified looking man came over and said to me "When you get through, come by my office to see me." I thought he was one of the guys in the crew putting me on, so after the show I just went home. About a week later I got a call from the contractor Frank Vagnoni's secretary saying he wanted to know if I was available for several dates and when I came in she said he wanted to see me. I told her that if I saw him I would probably walk right by him because I did not know what he looked like. She said that was funny because Mr. Vagnoni told her that when I was there last he had told me to come by his office and I never went by. I asked if that had been Mr. Vagnoni and she said, "Apparently it was." When I went by his office that week he said "Mr. Wilder, how do you expect to be successful in the music business if you don't recognize a contractor when you see one?" This became a standard joke with him.

Winking: *What kinds of things were you playing at ABC?*

Wilder: Everything they did. *The Dick Cavett Show*, *Jack Parr*, *Sid Caesar*, *Voice of Firestone*, *Music for a Summer Night*, things of that nature. You could be scheduled for two shows a day sometimes even three, though two shows per day was the norm. I also played in the ABC Brass Quintet.

Winking: *Tell me about the ABC Brass Quintet.*

Wilder: ABC already had a string quartet and woodwind quintet so they decided they wanted to add a brass quintet. They had an FM show on Friday nights and these groups would alternate. The quintet consisted of Ray Crisara and myself on trumpets, Jimmy Buffington on French horn, Charlie Small on tenor trombone, and Tommy Mitchell on bass trombone. These were the some of the most sought-after classical players at the time, and Ray Crisara was the top of the heap. That group was a lot of fun.

Winking: *Were you playing in orchestras also?*

Wilder: Yes. At that time, they did not want the orchestras in the same studio because it would get in the way of the dialogue so they started using remote control. With studio work, you never knew what you were going to play when you went to work so it was very interesting. You would look on the schedule to see what you were assigned to that week. At the beginning I was a little shy about coming to work since I never knew what I was going to have to play and I was afraid they would nail me with something I could not play. It then became a challenge to come in and play something you had never seen

before, run through it and then play it live on the air. You became very proficient at sight-reading. There were some comical moments… Mr. Vagnoni's secretary would tell us that they needed us on Friday "Ten to One." I was lucky enough that when they told me "ten to one" that I knew it meant from 10:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. There were a couple of guys though who thought it meant ten minutes to one. I remember one instance where everyone was warming up at 9:30 for a 10:00 A.M. rehearsal and one fellow was not around. 10:00 comes around and he is still not there so Mr. Vagnoni asked if any of us had seen him. Nobody had so he had is secretary call this fellows house and his wife said she did not know where he was either. Now it is 11:30, and he is still not there; 12:00, still not there. We get to about 12:30 P.M. and he finally walks in. Mr. Vagnoni asks where he had been. "Don't you know that you are supposed to be here?" and then this fellow interjected, "You told me 'ten til one,' I still have twenty 20 minutes before we start." They realized that this guy had never worked in the studio and thought he meant ten minutes before one.

Winking: *Were you just working at ABC at that time or doing work outside of the network?*

Wilder: I did other studio work and a lot of jingles since you could do three or four of them in a day. One memorable job was playing in a 55-piece orchestra for the *Valiant Years*, a movie made for TV about the life of Winston Churchill. Another was the *Metropolitan Opera Auditions on the Air*… contestants would come and sing to see if they were good enough to work at the Met. Whoever won got to sing as an apprentice with the opera.

Back then there was a wide variety of things to do. When I was working in the studios, I would be home practicing some new book of studies working on segments that were new and challenging and then the next day, I would get a call to do a session and when I went to the session the music would be the same kinds of things that I had just been practicing. This happened to me many times and it always made my life easier.

Winking: *Were you still paying club dates at that time (1957 – 1977)?*

Wilder: No, not really… I played the *Miss America Pageant* with Abe Osser for twenty-two consecutive years. When the orchestra finally quit doing that pageant, I was the third longest musician playing that show. The guys who had been playing that show had no experience playing operatic literature and since I had experience at ABC, they hired me. For twelve years I also did the *Tony Awards* with the Elliot Lawrence Orchestra.

Winking: *Tell me about the Symphony of the New World.*

Wilder: This was the first racially integrated orchestra in America. It started in the late 1960s. There were some black classical players who were friends with Ben Steninberg, who was a fine violinist, and they decided that someone should open the door to give black musicians who were classically oriented an opportunity to play and develop their craft. Ben was the conductor and along with the some black classical players started the orchestra and made it completely integrated, almost 50-50. I was one of the charter members. There were some really fine musicians in that group… people like Eli Carmen, one of the world's great bassoonists at that time. In addition to playing with Symphony of the New World, I also got the opportunity to play some with the New York Philharmonic.

Winking: *When did the studio work start to dry up?*

Wilder: Around 1977. They also stopped using the group for the *Miss America Pageant* in 1978 and that was very sad because we had been there for so long. It was kind of hit and miss. I started playing Broadway shows again. Around 1980 – 81, I played with the original *42nd Street* and that went on for more than eight years. After that I did whatever came along.

Winking: *When did you start with the Smithsonian Jazz Orchestra?*

Wilder: I think 1990. Gunther Schuller was there and was responsible for my being hired with the group along with David Baker.

Winking: *I know you have performed on a lot of recordings but I want to talk about some of your solo recordings.*

Wilder: I did two albums for Columbia in the 1960s: *The Pretty Sounds* and *Peter Gunn*. I actually did a third with some arrangements by Johnny Mandel but it was never released. In the 1950s, when I was working with the Lucky Millendar Band, I did a couple of recordings under my name for Savoy including *Wilder and Wilder*. With Savoy you never knew who was going to be the leader. They would call you up and ask if you were available for a session on a specific date and you did not know what you were going to do until you got there. On the day of the session they would tell us to pick some tunes we wanted to play and then at the end of the session they would tell you that you were the leader which meant you got $50 more. Most recently, I have been recording for Evening Star Records and I have two recordings on that label *No Greater Love* and *Alone with Just My Dreams*.

Winking: *Didn't you also record a classical record?*

Wilder: Alec Wilder (no relation) wrote a trumpet sonata in the 1960s. I recorded that for Golden Crest Records. When he asked me to play it, I looked at it and said there is no way I can play that. He said, "Don't tell me you can't play it because most of what I have written is based on things I've heard you play." I thought he was lying like a thief but I felt that it was such an honor to have someone like him want me to play it I managed to get through it.

Winking: *Any final thoughts?*

Wilder: I have been so fortunate in my life in that many people like Billy Butterfield who I mentioned earlier, have helped me. I was able to play with the New York Philharmonic due to Jimmy Chambers, the first horn player, who was the contractor. Jimmy and I had played together on some commercials dates and he mentioned that the Philharmonic sometimes needed extra trumpets and said he would give me a call, and he did. There have been so many people like that in my life and I am grateful to all of them.

About the author: Keith Winking is professor of music at Texas State University in San Marcos where he teaches trumpet and directs the jazz ensemble. Winking's degrees are from Quincy University (BME), Texas State University (MM), and the University of Texas (DMA). His teachers have included Raymond Crisara, Vincent Cichowicz, Leon Rapier, and Don "Jake" Jacoby. Winking has presented solo and ensemble recitals and master classes throughout the United States, Canada, Sweden, Japan, Switzerland, and Russia. He is a Selmer/Bach clinician.