

A Conversation with Vahey "Tak" Takvorian Trombonist Recalls Career Highlights

by Richard Vacca

WATERTOWN, Mass. (Jan. 13, 2004) - I was born in Somerville, Mass., in 1922, and my family moved to Watertown when I was three.

My twin brother, Vasken, and I were both playing music in high school; he played bass, and I played trombone. In fact, before I graduated from high school in 1940, I was already playing four nights a week with Larry Cooper's band at the Mansion Inn in Cochituate. Cooper played clarinet and modeled his band after Artie Shaw's. I listened to a lot of Jack Teagarden, Tommy Dorsey and Dickie Wells, from Basie's band. I'd name those three as my main influences.

I was playing around the Boston area when I joined Sam Donahue's band in Boston in April 1941. Eddie Bert tells a story about this, how he was already in the band but Sam needed a guy who could read music for an upcoming recording session. Eddie couldn't read at that time . . . and I auditioned, got the job and took his place in the band. I've known Eddie for years and we still laugh about it.

When I first joined the Donahue band, Ralph Burns was doing a little writing for Sam. I knew Ralph when we were kids, and he also played a bit with Larry Cooper. Ralph had a lot of talent. And Frances Wayne joined Donahue at the same time I did, as vocalist. I stayed in the Donahue band until I went in the Navy in October 1942. Both my brother and I enlisted-when our number came up, our father told us to join the Navy. He had been in the Army in World War I and warned us away from that. So I joined the Navy, and at that time Artie Shaw was recruiting for the Navy band.

He got Sam, and Sam recommended me. And there's a funny story goes with it. My brother was playing in Bob Foster's jazz group in the New York/New Jersey area, so he enlisted in New York and went to camp in Newport, R.I. About 10 days later, he gets orders to report to New York, to join Artie Shaw and the Navy band. He says, "You've got the wrong Takvorian." They told him to just go to New York. So he gets there, and he tells Shaw, "I think you've got the wrong Takvorian." And Shaw says, "How many musicians named 'V. Takvorian' could there be?" Well, there were at least two-I'm Vahey and my brother is Vasken. So they got that straightened out and got me down there. Shaw thought the whole thing was hilarious. Shaw already had a bass player, so my brother couldn't stay. He was sent down to Florida, and ended up in a band aboard the USS Ticonderoga.

That Navy band was something. Besides Sam Donahue, we had Claude Thornhill, Davey Tough, Max Kaminsky, Conrad Gozzo, John Best, Dick LeFave, Frank Beach, Don Jacoby. We spent two or three weeks getting organized and then went out to San Francisco, and from there to Hawaii. We arrived on Christmas Day 1942. We were in Hawaii for three months. Thornhill stayed on there, but the rest of us toured the South Pacific, all the way to Australia, places like Guadalcanal, the Solomons. We traveled on everything that could float except a submarine. We got back to the States in December 1943 for a 30-day leave. Artie Shaw and some of the guys, like Kaminsky and Tough, got their discharges then.

In 1944, Sam Donahue took over the band, and we went to Washington, D.C., and reorganized, and shipped out to England, in the dead of winter, aboard an LST (a transport ship designed for vehicles, not people). It took 30 days to make the trip to England! We stayed for just over a year.

We got back to the States in April 1945, but I couldn't get out of the Navy right away because I didn't have enough points. The Navy sent us out to California, and I spent my last three months in the service living in Hollywood and working with the Armed Forces Radio Service, doing programs like Command Performance. In January 1946, I was discharged.

I came back home but didn't stay long, because Sam Donahue organized a new band in March and I went out again, but we had a tough time of it. Then I had a chance to go with Claude Thornhill in June 1946, and I stayed with him for about two years. That was a great band, and some of the guys I played with were Red Rodney, Gerry Mulligan, and Lee Konitz. Lou Mucci played first trumpet, and he was just one of the greatest. Gil Evans was writing and arranging. Ted Goddard, from Medford, played alto. We did quite a bit of recording, things like "Deed I Do," "Robbin's Nest," "Poor Little Rich Girl." A few where I had solos were "Anthropology" and "Donna Lee." But after two years, I was tired of the road, so I came home, and worked with Larry Green out at the Meadows on Route 9 in Framingham.

When Benny Goodman was putting together his bebop band in 1948, Buddy Greco recommended me for a job. Eddie Bert was in that band, Wardell Gray. I rehearsed with the band for three or four days and was offered a job but didn't take it.

Benny didn't offer much money. Benny was cheap! So that was the extent of my work with Goodman.

In 1950 I went back on the road with Tex Benecke, who was leading the Glenn Miller band, and stayed with him for a year and a half. Red Rodney was in the band then, and Nick Travis. Mel Lewis was the drummer. Then I joined Tommy Dorsey's band, and in 1953, he and Jimmy patched things up and it became the Dorsey Brothers, and it was that way until Tommy died in November 1956. Jackie Gleason was a big fan of Tommy's; we did the Gleason show on television for two years in New York, and played behind Sinatra at the Paramount Theatre in 1956. After Tommy died, Jimmy ran the band. I stayed until March 1957.

I had met Ray McKinley in England during the war. He was with Glenn Miller's Army band, and I got to know him then. He put a band together, and I spent the summer of 1957 with McKinley. But I had had enough of the road. I had gotten married, and I was teaching in the Concord schools. I went back to school myself, to Boston University, and made a career in teaching. Back in Boston, I freelanced, played with touring shows like the ice shows, and worked in the theaters. I played in the band at Blinstrub's in South Boston for years. Sam Donahue was leading the Dorsey ghost band in the early 1960s, and I saw them when they came through Blinstrub's, but I never played with them.

My last long gig was here in Boston, with Herb Pomeroy, when he put together his big band. This was after the Stables years. I sat in at the Stables, but wasn't in Herb's band then. A recording I remember making with the Pomeroy Orchestra was the Pramlatta's Hips album, recorded at the El Morocco in Worcester in 1980. I stayed with the band until Herb broke it up in the 1980s.

Since the Pomeroy band, I've freelanced around the area as the opportunity arises, and put in some enjoyable hours on the golf course. And that's the way it is now, in 2004.

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