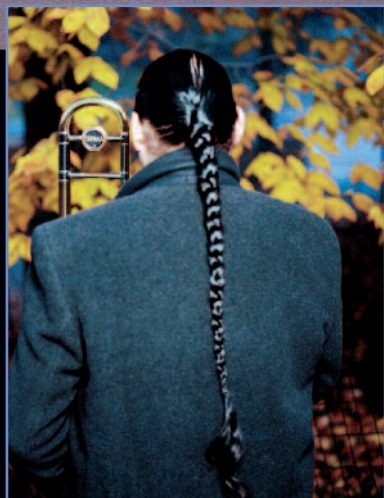


Steve Turré:

Future Sounds from the Past

You can't call Steve Turré a traditionalist—his trombone playing is far too innovative and open-ended. Yet Turré's knowledge of jazz tradition informs everything he does.

Since his breakthrough gig with Ray Charles in 1972, Turré has worked with an astonishing array of jazz giants: Dizzy Gillespie, Tito Puente, Art Blakey, McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, Woody Shaw, Pharoah Sanders, Horace Silver, Max Roach, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk—the man Turré refers to as “my teacher.”



Turré started playing with—and learning from—composer/saxophonist Kirk soon after graduating high school. “One of the most important things he taught me is that you have to know what came before you in order to know where you're going,” says Turré, speaking from his home in New York City. “And how far back you go directly influences how far forward you can go.”

In Turré's case, that meant bridging his two early influences: the traditional New Orleans jazz he'd cut his teeth on as a San Francisco Bay Area high school student, and the bebop virtuosity of J.J. Johnson, a player generally considered the Charlie Parker of the trombone. “Rahsaan said he could hear the New Orleans and the J.J. in my playing, but not what came between,” recalls Turre. “He told me I needed to make the connection between the two, because a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. He exposed me to records of all the cats who played with Duke Ellington and Count Basie and all the other great swing players. In the process, I learned that it's not about old vs. new. It's about good vs. bad.”

More than 30 years later, Turré still lives by that creed. That flexible outlook has enabled him to play jazz, Latin, and funk with equal skill, not to mention his 20-year tenure in the Saturday Night Live band. Whatever the gig, Turré brings to bear his powerful tone, fluid imagination, and drop-dead virtuosity.

Yet for all his technical skill, Turré's career has been marked by a migration away from complexity for its own sake. “The essence of all music is simplicity,” he insists. “I got into bebop when I was young, so naturally I wanted to play fast. But when I got into a more modern style, I found I had difficulty playing simply and having it mean something.”

A mid-career influence helped Turre break that block. And it came from an unusual place: the ocean.

Turre started playing seashells. And just as Rahsaan Roland Kirk had preached, the process of immersing himself in one of the most ancient musical instruments helped Turré move forward with his trombone playing. “The shells forced me to play simply,” he says. “You can't run scales and arpeggios on them. After finding my style on the shells, I was able to play the trombone with simplicity and meaning. Now I can create just as much excitement with something simple as I could with something fast and high.” Turré still plays shells on many gigs and routinely nabs the “Best Miscellaneous Instrument” prize in the *Down Beat* Reader's Poll.

When Turré doesn't have his mouth on a shell, he's likely to be blowing into his Yamaha trombone. “I've been playing Yamaha's since 1982,” he says. “At the time my chops were growing stronger and my breathing was becoming more efficient, so I wanted a bigger horn to play the full dynamics I was hearing. Yamaha made me a custom trombone with an extra-wide bore, which I played from 1994 until this year. But I just got Yamaha's new trombone, with what they call their Xeno bell. It sounds so resonant and open, and it holds together under all dynamics. I've used my new trombone on Latin gigs, big band gigs, small group gigs, funk gigs, and it holds up in every situation. It's the best thing I've ever played by far. I'm sold.” Turre's horn has a .547 gold/brass bell and a dual-bore custom slide (.525 on top, .547 on the bottom). He opts for a small-shank mouthpiece, because he prefers its crisper articulation.

Besides his sideman work, Turré has released numerous albums as a bandleader. They offer not only stellar musicianship, but unique slants on Turre's instruments. For example, 1999's *Lotus Flower* set trombone and shells against strings and African percussion. The following year's *In the Spur of the Moment* paired Turré with three master pianists, all with very different styles: Ray Charles, Chucho Valdes, and Stephen Scott. Last year's *One 4 J* was a J.J. Johnson tribute project featuring five fellow trombonists. And Turré's brand-new Hightone release takes him back to his roots.

“It's called *Spirits Up Above*, and it features the music of Rahsaan Roland Kirk,” says Turré. “It came out good. I'm very pleased. And I'm honoring my teacher.”

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