

CARL FONTANA

There is something of the young boy's capacity to hero-worship that happily never leaves many of us. At some earlier stage in our life we may encounter, read, or hear things which ring huge aesthetic bells, right there on the spot, sending shock waves to lap around our consciousness for the rest of our days. The unsuspecting instigators of these precious gestalts become heroes and models to us; giants in our eyes.

One of my luckier breaks was to buy a second-hand copy of "Stan Kenton in Hi-Fi" at Ashwood's record store in Sydney in the late Sixties. Side one: "Artistry Jumps", followed by "Interlude"—both tracks nice enough, and atmospheric. Then track three, "Intermission Riff", with its intriguing little half-tone

shifts. After Vido Musso's brawny saxophone solo there is a 12-bar ensemble measure where agitated trumpets and trombones rush and fuss around, like courtiers preparing for the arrival of royalty. And, sure enough, Carl Fontana comes gliding majestically in with four of the most elegantly-played trombone choruses you've ever heard. Wonderful articulation and control, imagination, range, a little wry humour to flavour, and an appropriate poignancy.

From that magic moment of discovery I silently appointed Carl Fontana to my personal Order of Heroes and determined to find out more about him. This was more difficult than I'd imagined: his recordings seemed comparatively rare at that time, nor was he profiled in jazz magazines. Paradoxically most fel-

low `bone players I talked to would enthuse: "Oh yes, Fontana, fantastic, my favourite too!"

October '88—twenty years on—found me on the Nevada trail in search of the man. Highway 10 out of Los Angeles and turning northwest over the mountains, past overheated saloons resting on the hard shoulder, and on down to the scrubby desert towards Las Vegas. Las Vegas! The very words reek of diamanté and from thirty miles away out on the highway this hedonistic oasis can be easily marked by the glow of the huge neon chrysanthemum it casts up into the sky.

Three years ago—on a rare trip abroad—Fontana played the Edinburgh Festival, thrilling everyone—except me, that is. I was away on tour myself, and so missed everything. But now I was

But now I was approaching Vegas; I'd been assured he was working with his own quartet at Bourbon Street, I just wanted to shake the slide-hand of "the jazz-trombonists' trombonist".

It was Columbus Day holiday weekend and the streets were jammed with noisy cars and punters. Enormous glittering signs offered Vic Damone, Al Jarreau, or Wayne Newton, while the harsh cranking of fruit machines could be heard through the open doors of every club.

In Bourbon Street, to my dismay, I found a sextet bashing out old Herb Alpert hits to fewer than a dozen people in a corner lounge area while scores of others stood grimly engrossed among rows of machines stretching sixty yards down the room. A barman told me Carl's band had left three weeks before. So now, at midnight, I decided upon a little Philip Marlowe investigation and rang the Musicians' Union. Their answering service gave me the number

of the MU's private club. A friendly voice answered, shouting over the sound of a big band, "Carl Fontana?" (Hang on, he'd ask the guys.) "Is CF in town?" I heard him shouting to others. They thought he was. Sure, it would be okay to ring him at home. I did. He was in, and agreed to meet me later at the club for a chat.

The club is a large building felicitously located at the corner of Tropicana Avenue and Duke Ellington Way. It houses the administrative offices of MU Local 369 as well as spacious rehearsal/performance room with bar and bandstand, making it a tremendous community centre for fellow pros. (Where is London's equivalent? Was Archer Street the last?)

When I arrived a big band was packing up, but only to make way for the 2am start by another one, run by trumpeter-arranger Herbie Phillips. Musicians drifted in with horn cases, some straight from their gigs on The Strip. Acting as genial barman for the night was Alan Ware, a

trumpet man originally out of Wichita, who is now secretary-treasurer of the union. "You've hit jackpot tonight," he said, "this is a great band with great charts." He explained that there were live sessions here Wednesday through to Sunday every week. "There's some great players around here and we tend to take the quality for granted sometimes." He broke off to introduce me to a very affable Carson Smith, bassist on the original Gerry Mulligan Quartet records, then went on to comment wistfully on earlier times when top players could make marvellous money by working a show at three or four different clubs a night. It required planning, and your car waiting outside. Things were much quieter now, and he added witheringly: "You don't do anything hip here for a living anymore."

We got to talking about Carl, and Alan smiled. "Everybody loves CF, he's a giant." He carried on serving drinks as the bar got busier and the jokes and joshing picked up.

"Stick around till five," he shouted, "this place is a zoo."

Then the man himself arrived it was at once clear that he was indeed held in great affection. Greetings were thrown across from everywhere and half a dozen other people seemed to be waiting to see him about one thing or another. A little while later, with a Cutty Sark—Lime-Soda-on-the-Rocks in his hand and a Grolsch dark beer in mine, we headed off down the corridor to the quiet of the snooker room and sank into a couple of armchairs.

Carl Fontana has lived in Las Vegas for thirty years, originally arriving in town with alto-saxist Al Belletto's sextet in 1958. He'd been on the road solidly for eight years up till then. He thought it was time to take a break from touring and there was plenty of work in Vegas.

He was born and raised in Monroe, Louisiana, where his father Collie Fontana played tenor sax and ran a band. "He knew a lot, and he taught me a lot." Carl played in his

dad's band from 1945 to 1950 and also enrolled at Louisiana State University for a degree in musical education. "At college I went through the whole thing—marching band, symphony orchestra, and dance band. . . and on Friday and Saturday nights you could pick up between \$10 and \$25 with the dance band. I remember Bill Evans was at one of the nearby colleges and I think we did some gigs together at that time." What was his first pro break? "With Woody, at The Blue Room in New Orleans. I was with him from '51-'52, the Third Herd." I then asked him the usual one about influences, and he acknowledged early admiration for many guys including Dorsey, Jenney, Teagarden, Bill Harris, Benny Green and Tommy Turk. "But the big bands were always my first love. That's what I really liked best, the big bands." After Woody there were spells with Hal McIntyre, Kai Winding's Sextet (featuring four trombones), and Stan Kenton's Orchestra (which toured Britain in

March 1956 and went on to eleven other European countries).

Then the roots going down in Vegas, regular work on the Strip, and occasional tours, like with Woody again in 1966 (going on after the British leg that time to do twelve weeks in Africa!) I knew that he'd worked for years in the trombone section of singer Paul Anka's backing orchestra whenever the Canadian was in tow or had a tour. "Paul's a trombone freak. . . for quite a while the section was Kai Winding, Frank Rosolino, and me." I said what a section that must have been, and he just smiled over his Cutty and nodded.

What about life in Las Vegas nowadays, I wondered. Is he still as busy as he wants to be? "This used to be a late-night town. There used to be 1500 musicians working here as recently as 6 or 7 years ago—but now it's down to about 160. Hotels are phasing out big bands and in fact they're trying to get away with no entertainment at all. But as for me,

I've just turned 60 and, as far as regular work on the Strip is concerned, I've more or less retired. "

I'd expected to be able to hear him at Bourbon Street. What had happened there?

"The management thought they'd like to try a little late-night jazz atmosphere and wanted my quartet to do a 2am till 6am slot. We managed to get that changed to one till five, but although it was a good band and a bunch of about 15 to 20 friends and fans supported us regularly, the public just didn't show up. We did 14 weeks and it was great for the chops, but when the gig ended the horn went in the closet and the golf clubs came out." As we talked we could hear Herbie Phillips's band in full flight and Carl nodded in that direction. "They wanted me to play tonight, but I didn't want to go through all that." It was encouraging to hear that getting your chops back is hard work for him too.

I suggested that electrified and synthesized pop excesses probably contributed to the demise of work on the Strip. He said he thought that popular music works its way along through a series of peaks and troughs.

"At the moment. . . ' Here, his hand described a low curve. A grim smirk completed the sentence.

Although he's been recorded in featured roles much more prolifically in recent years—with The World's Greatest Jazz Band on the World Jazz label, with Jake Hanna on Concord, with Bill Watrous on Atlas (1984), and on a recent breathtaking release with the late Al Cohn on Uptown Records (1985), he still remains a virtuoso known more to musicians than to the public. Other Americans turn up in droves for the annual summer season of European festivals. Why had he not got on to this lucrative and name-enhancing circuit? It seemed to me that he deserved more fame. "Oh,"

he said, "I've never really gone after that."

But he would be very happy to visit Europe again, although two weeks would be long enough away from home. Working with a trio would be preferable, but he does enjoy teaching too and does clinics at colleges around the country. "You fly in Friday, do a clinic Saturday afternoon, a concert at night, and home on Sunday. The money is very good."

I had to ask about that fabulous speed on the horn—a bewildering facility that keeps players like myself eyeing the sits. vac. columns for office jobs. Has he always used a rigorous practice schedule? "No, nothing like that. . I just worked gradually away at it over the years ... That Kai Winding trombone choir record you mentioned—well, I don't play like that now." And what about the hardware itself? "Well, I've used a Vincent Bach 8 Slide together with a Bach 12 bell for about the last dozen years and it seems to work

OK for me. And a Bach 11C mouthpiece—Bill Watrous uses the same mouthpiece too. "

Did he like other kinds of music too; classical for instance? "Sure, I like a lot of classical music—Bartok, Prokofiev, most of the Impressionists. I think that Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand is a particularly beautiful piece of music."

And any brothers, sisters, children, in the music business? "No, but I've a brother who's a dentist who fools around on the trumpet." But it then quickly became clear that the new star of the Fontana clan is grandson AJ, who's not yet two "but can make a sound on the trombone." Here, Carl pressed his lips lightly to the back of his hand.)

"I took him on my knee and pressed my lips against his cheek, like this, and started to go 'doodle-oodle-oodle-oddle,' then I got the horn and put it to his lips, and he got a sound. . . not yet two, and he got a sound."

Now, Fontana is a hardened pro himself, a brilliant virtuoso who commands respect around the world from some of the most hard-bitten, hard-to-please and temperamental pros. But I have to report that at that moment, describing little AJ, he was as soft and vulnerable as any other proud grandfather.

Just before we returned to the gang in the bar I asked about other interests. Sports, for instance. He'd played college softball (outfield and

pitcher), as well as football and basketball. As for golf, "I find it a real challenge and I just go out there and hit it like a baseball". He mentioned with a wide grin that he'd managed to play nine holes at the exclusive Muirfield course while over for the Edinburgh Festival.

Modestly, he didn't mention karate. But it was trumpet man Jack Sheldon who told me later, back in LA, that Carl was good at it and had sorted out some biker hooligans after an argument on the freeway, despite getting his arm broken by a flailing chain. That's how I like my heroes. Unassuming, yet tough. Unbeatable, in fact.