Byron Lee Autrey

DECEMBER 10, 1924– JULY 20, 2018

When Byron Autrey passed away very suddenly in July of 2018, Tim Wendt, writing on the TrumpetHerald forum summed-up his behind the scenes yet critical career by saying “Byron's name is not one that was well-known outside of the trumpet community. But for those in our community who knew him, there was nothing but admiration and respect.” He also, in expressing the surprise everyone felt at losing Byron with words that describe what enabled Byron to, as another poster said, have had such a profound impact on not just performance, but on pedagogy and equipment as well – perhaps most importantly equipment – said: “I also had no idea he was 93. When you'd talk with him, his energy and enthusiasm were that of someone much, much younger.”

That last statement by Tim Wendt was a sentiment shared by all who knew, or ever worked alongside Byron. He thought nothing of jumping in his beat-up van (there were several across the decades yet they somehow always looked the same) and driving hundreds of miles for a gig at the last minute, or making the regular 250+ mile trip from his home to work on research at Schilke in Chicago – and then drive home again. Like so many, he began this behavior in his twenties and thirties shuffling performing, teaching, and trumpet design and research, living as so many musicians of the early twentieth century did by the understanding that, in Byron’s words, “you do what you have to, to make a living”. However, through a long university teaching career, consulting with many major makers, and performing anywhere and everywhere, he never backed off. At an age when many would move into a care facility, Byron still hit the road regularly.

The amazing fortitude of the man notwithstanding, one then comes to wonder how would an 80-something year old trumpet guy actually have somewhere to go? The demand for Byron’s input, and

even for his playing, never waned – even into his 90s. So, Byron worked literally every day from high school until the day before he died.

Byron Autrey started out as the son of a truck driver, Robert, and his wife Harriet, in the central Texas oil fields around Mexia, entering the world on December 10th 1924. As Byron often pointed out, he came along just as the trumpet was displacing the role the cornet had held in music during the preceding 50 to 75 years. He did not get an early start, but when he received his first cornet from his parents, a King Master Model, which was the cornet model he would play for the rest of his life, he excelled. By the time he graduated from high school, that cornet was all he needed to enter the Navy's V-12 officer development program and obtain his degree from what became the University of Texas at Arlington on the Navy's dime.

While in college, he studied with Earl Irons, and alongside of soon-to-be legendary University of North Texas professor John Haynie, whose students would include many of the most respected players and another influential trumpet designer and researcher, R. Dale Olson. Byron maintained a friendship and professional relationship with Haynie throughout his teaching career. This "back channel" between Michigan State and UNT was not always obvious, but not only did information flow through it, but also sometimes students. This is most entertainingly demonstrated by the case of one Ron Wright who found himself in limbo as UNT admissions stalled on determining graduate assistantships for the 1965-66 school year. John Haynie called Byron Autrey, who then arranged an assistantship at Michigan State, and Wright only found out after the University contacted him informing him he was going there.

Autrey is said to mean "the person in a strange place". In Byron's case, "unique" fits better. The family, Byron claimed, originated in the Gaelic precursors to Belgium and the French/German borderlands. He took note of the blonde hair and blue eyes of his grandfather, as well as that grandfather's continuation of a family military heritage stretching back to the Roman Legions. That heritage however was not one that appealed to Byron, and when offered a position in the Navy Band, something he later admitted he had not begun to grasp the significance of, he declined, as it would have meant a military career.

With WWII having ended by 1947 as Byron obtained his degree, the Navy, under a mandate to downsize, had no objection to Byron taking the degree the Navy had funded and entering civilian life.

With immense natural talent, and training by one of the most respected masters of the time, Byron had evolved into a very capable performer by this time. While he, in his words, "never desired to make a living as a trumpet player", he had already begun a professional playing career that would span over 60 years. To make a living however, he took to teaching, starting with a junior high program in Pasadena Texas in 1947. He moved on to high school groups, and by his sixth year of teaching, was winning first divisions his first (and last) year with his band in White Deer. It was at that time that he was offered a position at Michigan State, where he would spend the next 37 years teaching cornet and trumpet. Of

course, even after his retirement in 1990, he never really stopped teaching. In her 2015 notes to the Spartan Marching Band community, Beryl Falcone noted that then 90-year-old Byron was working with a church quintet run by MSU graduate Tom Fredericks.

More surprisingly, she also noted that Byron qualified as SMB alumni by virtue of having marched with the band at the 1953 Rose Bowl!

As a teacher, Byron Autrey started, or accelerated a great many trumpeters, on the path to significant careers. His students, sometimes fresh from college, landed positions in major orchestras, and also, despite Byron's admission that he "couldn't put two notes of jazz back-to-back if (he) had to", landed lead slots with bands such as Buddy Rich, Stan Kenton, Maynard Fergusson, and others. He provided students with the tools necessary for successes as expected as becoming in-demand studio players, to as bizarre as a euphonium player who became a trumpet historian and author despite physical limitations on embouchure that only Byron's unique insights into tone production such as "half of tone production and intonation happens behind the chops" allowed that author to overcome with a trumpet.

Just as he kept on teaching, Byron never stopped playing. In his 80s, his daily routine with the horn would have been enough to wear out a lesser player. In his 90s, he still played at church – his horns were found in his closet upstairs, in the gig bag, still ready to go after he passed.

While he was known best for his role in the trumpet world, and was often in demand as a trumpet player, Byron was most recorded as a cornet player. With Leonard Smith's Detroit Concert Band, he appeared on over 30 albums. His involvement with the band began in 1954 when Smith tracked him down through University of Michigan legend William D. Revelli who, despite the cross-state rivalry with Michigan State, maintained a close working relationship with MSU Director of Bands Leonard Falcone whose brother Nick had been Revelli's predecessor. (Leonard had actually covered the Director of Bands role for a year between his brother and Revelli, commuting daily between the two schools). Byron was hired, as second choice actually, to back-up Smith as cornet soloist whenever Smith didn't feel up to it. He would fill that role on and off for decades to come, though the first time he played the full summer season in Detroit was 1976.

Byron Autrey, for much of his life, saw himself as a conductor more than a player. This perception started with his school bands, and extended for 3 decades with his leadership of groups such as the Lansing VFW band, a professional ensemble in Grand Rapids, and the Lansing Community Band. He only transitioned to seeing himself as a performer first after 1976, when agreeing to play the full season with DCB had required him to step down from all of his conducting positions.

Byron Autrey remained a key member of the Detroit Concert Band for the remainder of its existence. DCB was really the last of its kind. Professional concert bands had evolved from the military bands of the Civil War. At the time of the Civil War, the United States still followed the military model laid out by the founding fathers: one of a small Federal officer core that would organize and lead the mobilization of all of the state and local militias in times of crisis. At the end of the war, all of those local militias returned home with their bands, and the concert band era began. The sort of local band shell regular summer performance schedules that emerged by the 1870s is what DCB maintained through the 1980s.

1982 SEASON SCHEDULE
DETROIT CONCERT BAND

Thursday	July 1	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Friday	July 2	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Monday	July 5	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Tuesday	July 6	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Wednesday	July 7	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Thursday	July 8	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Friday	July 9	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Saturday	July 10	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Tuesday	July 13	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Wednesday	July 14	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Thursday	July 15	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Friday	July 16	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Tuesday	July 20	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Wednesday	July 21	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Friday	July 23	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Tuesday	July 27	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Wednesday	July 28	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Thursday	July 29	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Friday	July 30	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Saturday	July 31	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Tuesday	August 3	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Wednesday	August 4	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Thursday	August 5	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Friday	August 6	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Saturday	August 7	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Tuesday	August 10	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Wednesday	August 11	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Thursday	August 12	4 - 6 PM	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Friday	August 13	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Saturday	August 14	7:30 PM	Performance	Michigan State Fair Grounds
Tuesday	August 17	10 AM - 12 noon	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Wednesday	August 18	10 AM - 1 PM	Recording	Masonic Auditorium
Thursday	August 19	10 AM - 12 noon	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
Friday	August 20	10 AM - 1 PM	Recording	Masonic Auditorium
*Saturday	August 21	10 AM - 12 noon	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
*Sunday	August 22	10 AM - 12 noon	Rehearsal	Shrine Club
*Monday	August 23	10 AM - 1 PM	Recording	Masonic Auditorium
*Tuesday	August 24	10 AM - 1 PM	Recording	Masonic Auditorium
Sunday	August 29	6:30 PM	Performance	Livonia, Ford Field

*These are tentative at 6-2-82. Will be confirmed at earliest possible date.

UNIFORM: DCB with white collar and white cuffs, black shoes and black sox. Everyone to have a clean and pressed short-sleeved white shirt available for all performances.

WIND CLIPS: 4 for each music rack.

CORNETS, TRUMPETS & TROMBONES: Straight and cup mutes for all rehearsals and performances.

DETROIT CONCERT BAND, INC., 20962 Mack Avenue, Grosse Pointe Woods, MI 48236
(313) 886-0394 Robert L. Finzel (313) 353-2657 Shrine Club (313) 831-7600

The Detroit Concert Band in 1982 paid $70 for 1 rehearsal and 1 performance. A recording rehearsal and session paid $183. The band's last season was in 1991.

That Civil War heritage of the concert band movement was another passion of Byron Autrey's. He played with several re-enactment and period ensembles using instruments made just after the Civil War. Among the ensembles he performed with were Clyde Noble's 37th Ga. Volunteer Infantry Band, the Union First Brigade Band in Northfield Minnesota, and the First Brigade Band in Watertown Wisconsin. He also filled in with the Dodworth Band from time to time. As noted, he thought nothing of driving for hours for a gig.

One of the primary instruments Byron played on in these roles was an exceptionally rare circa-1870 Martin Top-Action Rotary Valve (TARV) cornet he had made a new tuning receiver for and added a water key to. It was one of a handful of period horns he rescued and restored.

In band settings, Byron performed on cornet, or on post horn when he would fill in for Leonard Smith playing the classic post horn encore. The cornet he used was always one of his three King Silvertone Master Models. As a trumpeter, he also played many symphonic engagements as well as church work. Byron played with the Lansing Symphony among others, and, following his "go where the money is" approach to accepting work, took any gig he could drive to (which was a big chunk of the United States given his propensity to drive all night if need be). These public performances tapered off in his final years, though at age 90, he was still in shape to pick up and play with no preparation time for a friend's funeral.

When Rafael Mendez had to withdraw from performing at the outset of his 1964 tour, Byron Autrey stepped in and covered for him for all of the remaining engagements spanning several months. Dale Olson recalled that he went to the Mendez house in April of that year, when Byron was on the road for Mendez, to record duets with him, and that long breaks were required between takes for Mendez to rest. He was not able to perform again until that fall, and only played sporadically, retiring fully in 1967.

Byron Autrey Replaces Mendez As Featured Trumpet Soloist; Clinic Conducted After Concert

Byron's ability to take these distant gigs, fill in or play on last-minute notice, even while maintaining a full teaching schedule, stemmed from his ability, one critical for a serious working trumpeter, to read music. Sight-reading is often dismissed, but for the professional player who may be called upon to perform perfectly with no rehearsal, it is absolutely essential. This skill along with his ability to control his tone even when bending dramatically to match pitch with others (one

supported by his tendency to modify his horns to center very loose), allowed Byron to drive 300 miles, walk in, and play perfectly. As Olds sponsored Mendez, Byron probably also adapted to playing an Olds Custom for this, though the horn in blurry surviving photos could also be his 1962 Schilke B2.

This experience of knowing what it is like to have to depend on your equipment to enable your skills to manifest in a perfect performance under such challenges motivated his focus in the most impactful of his life's pursuits on the trumpet community: his research and design work.

As with his other musical avocations, Byron became involved in advancing the boundaries of understanding the workings of brass instruments and the design of trumpets relatively early in his career. It was Renold Schilke who really sparked his interest in the pursuit, and who also helped facilitate it throughout the remaining years of his life. As the leading salesman of Benge trumpets (which Byron admitted meant he sold about 10 per year), he met Benge's mentor and close friend Renold Schilke at a Midwestern Music Clinic in Chicago in 1954 or 1955. Schilke was so taken by not just Byron's playing, but by his sensitivity to subtleties in the horns he picked up, that Schilke recruited him to help in his study-of-the-moment into the effect of the base metal on mouthpiece performance. Schilke took Byron to his nearby home and had him blind test all sorts of different mouthpieces, but Byron consistently favored those that were made of yellow brass or sterling. In later similar endeavors, his preference was the same with bell material. By the time that first experiment was over, Schilke had found a new collaborator and friend, and Byron had found what would arguably be the great mission of his life: enhancing the technology behind trumpet making and specifically the French/Besson trumpet sound he already, like Schilke, Benge and Llewellyn, favored.

An interesting sidebar relating to Edward Llewellyn, principal trumpet of the Chicago Symphony before his student Benge, who was succeeded by another Llewellyn student, Schilke, is that Byron came to own Llewellyn's F.Besson Brevete trumpet he had used in the CSO (though he sold Llewellyn Model Holtons, he often performed on his Besson). Byron described that horn as "half Besson, half Conn". Llewellyn was not a brass maker, and it is well documented that Schilke during his time at Holton hand-assembled Llewellyn Models for himself and Llewellyn. As Benge was still learning from Schilke at the time Llewellyn was ending his playing career, it seems likely it would have been Schilke tweaking the horn. This horn was just one of many that appear to have passed through Schilke to Byron Autrey.


SOME OF BYRON AUTREY'S TOOLS

Within trumpet design circles, Byron Autrey's basement workshop was legendary. His basement was a jumbled heap of instruments, cases, parts, tools, and an occasional glimpse of open bench space. Byron made many of his own special tools for his work, and the number and variety of formal brass-working tools he had were actually few. The most distinctive feature however was the pipe running along the wall behind the lathe from which hung a couple dozen pre-war F.Besson Brevete bells, and then maybe a dozen MEHA bells, and then a dozen or more early English Besson bells,

and then more than a dozen late English Besson 2-20, 10-10, and similar bells. These were startling enough, but in the cabinets behind (as well as the lathe tool tray, assorted drawers, and random piles on shelves) were the stacks of a few dozen more F.Besson bells that had been cut up into pieces to study the metallurgy, thickness profile and hardness characteristics.

One consistent aspect of Byron Autrey's life was that he was never financially well off. Every spare penny he had went into his research. (When he died, the newer portions of his home were still furnished in classic 1960s/70s materials) There is no way he could have purchased these, or the horns they came from. The only person who would ever have accumulated so many Besson bells, would have been Benge, who built many of his first trumpets on original Besson cores, and before that had been repairing Bessons and adding his "Resno-Tempered" (Holton-made on a Besson mandrel) bells. It seems likely that Schilke must have facilitated the transfer of those scrap bells from Benge to Byron for research purposes. A uniquely engraved Llewellyn of the type Schilke played was also among the items found in Byron's shop – doubtless from the same source.

In Byron, Schilke had found a partner in his passion to advance trumpet making. They undertook the same forms of research, such as using contact microphones to precisely map the nodal layout of individual horns. They studied the impact of materials. They experimented with not only unique tapers, and the relationship between the tapers of the leadpipe and the tapers of the bell, but with the idea of "slowing" pressure waves by creating expanded sections – an example of which can still be found in Byron's expansion of the second valve slide on Schilke P5-4s. This technique helped reduce perceived resistance, aiding with slotting second valve combinations, and was also used on tuning slides, though only if done slightly. Expansion of the bore past 4/1000" resulted in the opposite effect. The tapered leadpipe of the Schilke P3 and P5-4 is another of Byron's contributions to the partnership that had him spending huge amounts of time in his space at the Schilke Chicago plant.

While Byron's research work was closely linked to Schilke, his design efforts, which began around the same year as he met Schilke, served many companies. In the early 50's his first real work in the field was for Schilke's former employer as a consultant, Martin. He did not make the connection through Schilke though, instead going there as Leonard Smith's personal designer while Smith was a Martin endorsing artist. His primary achievement there was the Smith Model cornet, which was a hand built version of the new Martin Committee cornet (built on the former Imperial rather than the first generation Committee wrap) that was tailored to the recipient, one at a time, one part at a time, hand engraved end to end and gold plated. The first few of these went to Leonard Smith, and then several more were built for others including some lucky students of Byron at Michigan State. They are now among the very rarest Martin horns, equaled in rarity only by the Miles Davis 3rd generation Committees.

When Leonard Smith decided to begin endorsing Reynolds instead of Martin in the mid-1950s, Byron moved along with him, consulting on several new Reynolds models. By 1965, 18 years after college, Byron had worked for Benge, Schilke, Martin, Reynolds, and Olds. It was just the beginning.

In 1981, Donald Benge and Zigmant Kanstul, an apprentice of Foster Reynolds and ultimately shop supervisor at Olds who had also moonlighted in the evenings building horns in the famed Benge garage, sought to revive the nature of the Benge trumpet, though the name belonged to King Musical Instruments which they both felt, Kanstul having recently left employment there, had completely departed from the concept behind Benge – that being a classic French/Besson trumpet sound. Their efforts needed help in that Kanstul, while an accomplished maker and valve builder, was not trained in the intricacies of tapers. Byron Autrey was not only arguably the leading expert at the time, Schilke having died within weeks, but was especially focused on the Benge/Besson form. Byron helped get the leadpipes right for what became the Burbank trumpets, dialing in the sound and feel in combination with the bell tapers to an even greater degree than Zig Kanstul could with the library of precision measurements he and Dale Olson had accumulated during the Olds Custom project.

Byron would continue consulting with Kanstul for the remainder of his life. This helped Kanstul reasonably claim to be the true heir to the Benge legacy, as well as introduce one of the best received flugelhorns ever introduced, which used a unique bell choke strategy Byron developed by studying a 19th century 4-valve rotary instrument that defied classification.

In tribute to Byron at the time of his passing, the Kanstul Musical Instrument Company published the following:

> *Byron was Elden Benge's first salesman and clinician, and has since consulted for some of the top names in the brass world. The mathematical approach he takes in understanding the flow of air and the vibration of the mouthpiece led him on, in his words, "many capers".*
>
> *Byron's expertise has been invaluable to Kanstul for many years. Zig has referred to him as "the finest in the world for mating a mouthpipe to a horn to make it play its best." Our Signature Piccolo and Eb trumpets, the Chicago series and Alto Horn have all received Byron's personal attention*

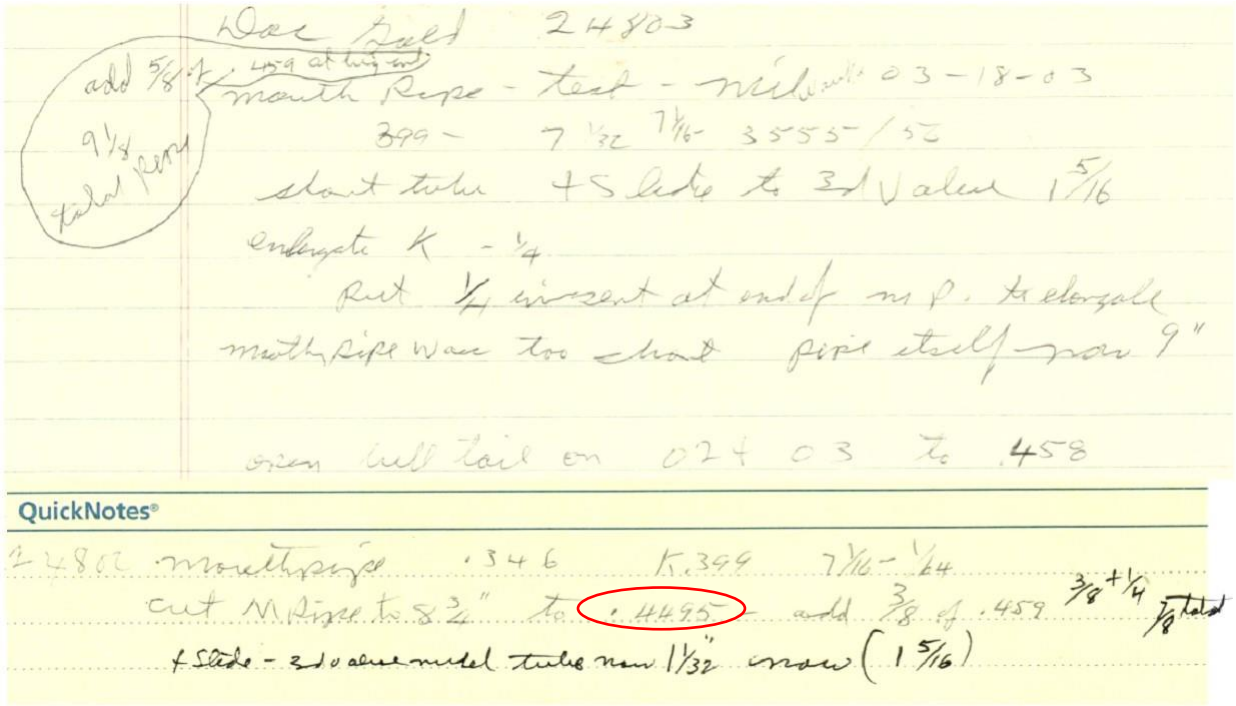
The significance of that work continues, as will be covered a little later in this essay.

Similarly, he also in these later decades consulted with the Getzen company, and its Edwards affiliate. His last work for Getzen appears from the records in his shop to have been several years prior to his death. In a TrumpetHerald post some years earlier, company President Brett Getzen wrote:

Byron helped us with the 3916 picc, the 3001MV Mike Vax, the 3810C cornet, the 3892 Eb cornet, and the 3895 small bore flugel. He is a great wealth of small brass knowledge. He also has some great stories. It's always a great day when I walk in in the morning and he is in the office.

After Reynolds was consumed by the Richards Music Corporation fiasco of 1961-1963, Leonard Smith began to scale back his activities, focusing on his Detroit Concert Band primarily. Smith would not be the only artist Byron Autrey would help bring personal models to market.

Tonight show band leader Doc Severinsen had developed a signature model with Getzen in the 1960s, and then in 1981 moved to C.G. Conn. Unsatisfied with the 5 or 6 models produced out of that endeavor, which included Doc being made an executive at Conn, he once again looked for a way to bring a horn to market that embodied what he valued in an instrument. The next reflected his desire for a Bach core with French brightness, and was created by Dick Ackright as a Bel Canto variant in the 1990s. That too fell short of the mark. Then, he looked to the one person known in the industry for taking a scientific approach to studying the object of a player's affection, and determining the unique combination of characteristics, including dimensional analysis at the 1/10,000" level, to identify what a horn reflecting that player's tastes would need to incorporate, Byron Autrey.



The first venture between Doc and Byron was the Destino trumpet, a name that Doc chose because first he liked names to be Italian, and second, he liked the idea of this being the "horn of destiny" for players. Franz Staub in Germany was selected to actually fabricate the horn. When the first horns arrived in the

US, Byron was awoken by a phone call in the middle of the night and an irate Doc shouting that “these horns play like ----------“ (let’s omit the actual words, though Byron later used the exact same to describe them). The next morning Byron was on a plane to Germany, where he found that Staub had made the leadpipe mandrel to the exact inner dimensions for the pipe, not compensating for the elasticity of the brass. The venturi was too tight. Every one of the 80+ Staub Destinos that were built had to have the leadpipe reworked by Byron.

Byron then connected Doc with Zig Kanstul, and the Kanstul Destinos were born. When Doc eventually pulled out of that arrangement as well, mostly looking at cost advantages available through Chinese-owned Shires, some of the technology of the Destinos then was utilized in the Kanstul X-model.

Chief among those technical elements were the harmonic balancers on the first and third valve slides. There are many in the trumpet community today, both boutique maker and aftermarket accessorizer, who owe one of their most successful trumpet products to Byron’s observational sensitivity and innovative nature. The story is that Byron was adding triggers to Benge trumpets for customers. He noticed that the first valve slide trigger altered the tone quality of the horn, clarifying (for lack of a better word). He thought about the mechanics of the horn as a system and realized that, hanging off the core of the horn, the slides could independently generate vibrations which then interacted with the main waveform when their resonant frequencies occurred in the overtone spectrum of the note being played. Just as one adds a penny to the back of a clock pendulum to alter the period of its movement, one could add a mass to a valve slide to alter its resonant frequency. His most drastic confirmatory experiment involved a refrigerator magnet attached to the first slide of a junk 1890s Bohemian stencil cornet. His first real implementation of the tech was on his own performance horn, his 1962 Schilke B2.

The weights were added at the very end by placing large thick plates of brass conformed to the shape of the slide crook on the end. Unfortunately, these resembled the patches one would need if having very carelessly dropped the slides until major repair was needed. The more favorable aesthetic of slightly larger nub shaped weights placed just inside the crook was then arrived at.

As noted above, Byron's work for Kanstul never halted. In his final weeks, he was working, using one of his Benge trumpets that had served as the test bed for a multitude of Kanstul design elements, to once again refine the leadpipe, continuing what began under Benge himself at Burbank when he first departed from authentic Besson leadpipe tapers. This was intended to become the leadpipe of a new Kanstul horn, part of the series announced but never released just prior to the closure of the company, but instead ultimately passed on to BAC Musical Instruments where it reunited with the Benge name.

Byron Autrey never planned his life, it just evolved around him. Gifted as a player, obsessed with scientific understanding of the instrument, and through acquaintance made as player, teacher, and craftsman, able to interact with the greats of the art in his time (Irons, Haynie, Smith, Benge, Schilke, Olson, Getzen, and Kanstul), he ultimately contributed to so many great makers in the long list of Martin, Reynolds, Schilke, Olds, Getzen, Kanstul, Benge, and BAC. The French trumpet sound will live on because he picked-up where Schilke left off (even travelling to Europe to search Boosey for surviving Besson tools, and viewing the charred ruins of the plant in France for process clues) furthering the work of Benge to save that sound when Besson faltered.

Byron's 8 decades as performer, teacher and design consultant shaped the trumpet world in ways most never saw, but all will continue to benefit from for generations to come.