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**A Tale of the Slide Trombone  
in Early Jazz**

by David Sager

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## A Tale of the Slide Trombone in Early Jazz

Once while I was rehearsing with a traditional jazz band as trombonist, a spectator pianist approached me with some good advice. He said,

**Stay away from the third of the chord, especially in the lower register. You see, you are interfering with the clarinet part. Play more root and fifth.**

At first I was incensed at being told how to play, but since my confronter was a fine musician whom I respected, I chose to reflect on his advice. Until the time of this confrontation, I was fairly arrogant about my "tailgate" trombone playing. I knew most of the traditional jazz repertoire and was confident on my instrument. I did have an annoying habit of dipping into the roles of other instruments when I felt that those particular parts were not being fulfilled. I was actually playing tailgate trombone by accident. There was a reason, which I was ignoring, for the trombone to be present in the first place. The advice I received that day from my pianist friend caused me to re-think my approach to ensemble jazz playing. This led me to begin looking into the origin of the tailgate trombone style.

We often hear stories about the origins of the term "tailgate" trombone. The usual tale is that in the days when bands traveled around on horse drawn wagons, the trombonist had to sit on the open tailgate of the wagon in order to have enough room to fully extend his slide. This story is entertaining and probably an accurate account of the origin of the term "tailgate," but it gives us little insight into how the tailgate style originated. Once while visiting an elderly jazzman I was treated to an amusing story about such origins. We were listening to a dixieland recording that my host had made during the 1950's. At one particular point during an ensemble passage, the trombonist began to play some erratic rhythmic "pecks" in the lower register of his instrument, much in

the manner of trombonists Roy Palmer and Santo Pecora. My host piped up enthusiastically, "You hear that? That's the real tailgate style! Do you know why?" I had to plead ignorance.

"It's because," he continued, "back in the days when the bands played on the wagons, the streets were full of cobblestones and were very bumpy. The trombone player had to time his playing just right so that he didn't knock his teeth out on a bump. So you see he plays, "brrrup... bruupp... brupp brupp brupp."

In traditional jazz, the trombone does have a certain role. The role is to be supportive. The trombone provides both a countermelody to the lead (played by the cornet or trumpet) and a rhythmic upper bass part. How this role came to be is really no mystery if one examines the role of the trombone throughout its use in ensemble music.

Since the late 1800's, composers and arrangers of military band music have pretty much standardized the roles of various wind instruments. The trombone, due to its range and technical tendencies was pretty much designated a rhythmic part, providing strong punctuations beneath the melody and an occasional counter melody. Most often in band music, the counter melodies were given to the euphonium, an instrument close in range to the trombone but with a warmer tone and equipped with valves so that fast technical passages are easily executed. The bassoon is also given the countermelody from time to time. Its range is also close to that of the trombone. So, because of its similarity in range to those two instruments, the trombone has come to represent the roles of these instruments in less formal settings such as the jazz band.

In the dance orchestras at the turn-of-the century, the trombone filled a similar niche. However, in place of the euphonium the dance orchestras used the 'cello as the countermelodist. Due to its similar range, the trombone was often used as a substitute for the

'cello when there was no 'cellist around. If that happened, the regular trombone part would just be left out. This would cause no problem since the typical trombone parts in dance orchestrations were often simple upper bass parts often doubled by the bassoon or viola. Of course, the trombonist would love the opportunity to play the 'cello part since it was far more fun and interesting than the trombone part. This accounts for the story of trombonist Honore Dutrey playing 'cello parts with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. Although that story may seem unusual, it is actually not surprising at all given what was common in dance orchestras at the time.



*Photo courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive*

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, 1937, featuring E. Edwards, tb; J.R. Robinson, p; T. Sbarbaro, d; H. Barth, b; L. Shields, cl; and N. LaRocca, leader and tpt

On March 5, 1917, the Victor Talking Machine Company issued Victor Record #18255. This disc featured the notorious Original Dixieland Jazz

Band playing two of their compositions: "Livery Stable Blues and Dixie Jass Band One-Step." These two selections made up the first-issued (though not first recorded) jazz phonograph record. This recording indicates that the roles played by each instrument were well defined by 1917 and comparable to later dixieland bands. Particularly well-developed was the work of O.D.J.B. trombonist Eddie Edwards. His playing reveals a solid knowledge of basic trombone technique, a good sense of phrasing, rhythmic punch, and a keen ear. It is not at all surprising to note that, by 1917, Edwards had been playing the trombone for ten years, as well as the violin for sixteen years. It is also noteworthy that among the ensembles in which Edwards played trombone were military bands. In a 1959 interview with Richard Allen, Edwards recalled a quartet in which he was violinist (along with the clarinetist Gus Mueller) and how he came to play the trombone.

**Gus (Mueller) advised, 'Get a trombone with it Eddie, from Sears-Roebuck.' Well I did get the trombone, but from Montgomery Ward: a shiny, B flat slide trombone, professional model for \$9.90 post paid. Now to learn that thing, I bought an Imperial Method and got along fairly well with it...However, I wished to play all through the tune, never taking the instruments down to play contramelodies, obbligatos. rhythmic beats, licks, breaks, pretty parts, growls, rough passages, tricks and so forth."**

Edwards' comments suggest that he was familiar with typical trombone parts in band and dance orchestra parts. A comparison of Edwards' recordings to printed music of that era, further supports this. Eddie Edwards' work with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was highly influential for many years to come and to this day still sounds fresh. It is very interesting to hear the British recordings by the O.D.J.B. in which Edwards' temporary re-

placement, Emile Christian (who was actually a cornetist) plays Edwards' parts nearly note for note off the original recordings. The comments of O.D.J.B. cornetist and leader, Nick LaRocca (as retold by H.O. Brunn) sum up Edwards' style quite well:

**Edwards was actually three trombonists in one -- he played harmony part of the time, counterpoint part of the time, and at other times accented the beat like a bass drum.**



*Photo courtesy of the LaRocca Collection*

O.O.J.B. with E. Christian in London in 1919

The trombonist of circa 1919 had to be aware of the art of "jazzing" on the trombone. This meant to be familiar with the glissando or smear. This "sliding" effect is produced when one note is held while the trombone slide is extended or retrieved. This was hardly a recent development in the late teens; by the early 1900's dance orchestras and military bands featured comic selections in

which the trombone was featured doing various glissandos. These numbers were called "trombone smears" and generally did not provide very interesting music. These "smears" were generally simple syncopated two-steps with the trombone emerging for one measure at a time and then falling back into the ensemble until the next written "smear." The "smears" themselves were not even very interesting as they simply would alternate from root to fifth and back again.

In February 1918, an interesting article appeared in The Metronome Band Monthly (forerunner to Metronome Magazine of the 1930's and 40's) protesting the use of the glissando by trombonists. The article was entitled "To Slide or Not To Slide". In it, author J.W. Holton takes the position that indiscriminate use of the "smear" from trombonists has a deteriorating effect on true musical appreciation. He states,

**Like the pedestrian on icy walks, it is sometimes easier to slip and slide than to place his feet on particular spots; so the amateur trombonist finds it easier to 'slip it' than to locate and strike accurately the proper position for any particular note.**

Mr. Holton's objections may have been to what he perceived as the simplistic blatancy of the "trombone smear," but it also suggests that perhaps he was not familiar with the highly superior works of Henry Fillmore.

Henry Fillmore was a very important composer and publisher in the first half of the twentieth century. Besides his marches he is best remembered for a series of "trombone smear" pieces that he published between 1908 and 1926. As a matter of fact these works are still in print today (published by Carl Fischer) and remain quite popular with military bands and trombone soloists. The Fillmore "smears" are comic ragtime pieces which feature the trombone playing both lead and counter melodies. The "smear," or glissando, is used extensively, but not inanely as in the other

published “smears” of the day. One of Fillmore's most interesting “smears” is a 1908 work called “Miss Trombone.” This piece is the most rag-like in the series and its first strain displays something quite special. In the third strain, Fillmore introduces a counter-melody that is very close to a dixieland trombone part, not at all unlike that of Eddie Edwards.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the piece "Miss Trombone" by Henry Fillmore. The title "Miss Trombone." is prominently displayed at the top, with the subtitle "A RIFFY RAG." underneath. The composer's name, "HENRY FILLMORE," is printed to the right of the title. The score is written for piano, with a treble and bass clef. It consists of five systems of music. The first system is marked "3037". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "ff". At the bottom of the page, there is a copyright notice: "Copyright 1908 by The Fillmore Mus. Co." and a "NOTICE" section that reads "REPRODUCTION STRICTLY FORBIDDEN WITHOUT WRITTEN AUTHORIZATION".

*Photo courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive*

Sample page of "Miss Trombone," one of Fillmore's published “smear” pieces. The smears (in small notes above) are indicated as a series of specific notes, to be slurred.

Fillmore had some competition in the “smear” department in the composer Mayhew L. Lake, who wrote a fine work called “Slidus Trombonus.” This multi-strain work is a compromise between the comic “smears” of Henry Fillmore and the more elegant virtuoso pieces by people such as Arthur Pryor.

Both Fillmore and Lake published instruction books on “jazz trombone” playing by 1919. Neither Fillmore's “The Jazz Trombonist” or Lake's “The Wizard Jazz Trombonist” deal with how to improvise or even memorize a supportive trombone part. Instead they show all the possible glissandos available on the trombone and offer some hints about how to incorporate them into a standard trombone part.



*Photo courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive*  
K. Ory, circa 1946

Another fine early work for the trombone is the now famous “Ory's Creole Trombone” written by pioneer jazzman Edward “Kid” Ory. While Lake's “Slidus Trombonus” is a kind of formal burlesque and Fillmore's pieces were wild ragtime novelties, “Ory's Creole Trombone” is a simple, “down home,” swinging piece from start to finish. Its melody is, indeed, creole in flavor. The trombone is shifted back and forth from lead to countermelody. Its first strain is a “smear” strain and in its third strain are some “breaks” where the soloist performs some simple but demanding pyrotechnics. In his various recordings of the piece, Kid Ory added so much of his own wit and charm that it could never be considered a “set piece” to be written down and played the same way each time.

Although much of the tailgate style came out of the printed repertoire of the early twentieth century, the true credit must go to the players themselves, for it is they who truly created it. It didn't matter if the player could read music or not an instinctive player naturally “gravitated” to a strong supporting line. However, one can be taught certain techniques, such as avoiding the third of the chord in favor of root tones and fifths. The trombonist can also

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**ORY'S CREOLE TROMBONE**

By EDWARD ORY

Moderato

*Photo courtesy of the Hogan Jazz Archive*

Sample page of "Ory's Creole trombone," in published form. Note that here the trombone "smears" are not precisely notated, but indicated by the shorthand "glissando" (i.e., slide) symbol

learn that not only does his instrument provide a rhythmic support and countermelody, but also acts as an acoustical springboard for the cornet and clarinet. These higher pitched instruments are literally boosted in their projection by the baritone quality of the trombone. But such knowledge does not, alone, make for a competent player. Certainly Eddie Edwards and Kid

Ory never worried about their “acoustical placement.” Neither did a New Orleans trombonist named Georg Brunis.

George Brunis (originally George Brunies) was considered one of the tailgate style's greatest exponents. Although he could not read music he had a marvelous ear and was a natural player. His style was simple and tastefully idiomatic. A glimpse into his thoughts on trombone playing can be seen in a 1958 interview with William Russell:

**RUSSELL:** “There was never anybody that actually showed you where the seven (slide) positions were?”

**BRUNIS:** “Nothing, that came natural”

**RUSSELL:** “Do you think about whether you were playing in the fourth position?”

**BRUNIS:** “I feel it.”

**RUSSELL:** “You don't even think?”

**BRUNIS:** “My heart puts my arm there. Where to put a shmeer (sic), where to put the right notes...”



*Photo courtesy of S. Brown*  
G. Brunis, circa 1922

Obviously, Brunis was not one for strict adherence to decorum. He played totally by ear and resisted learning how to read music. This does not seem to have had a negative effect on his playing or on his reputation in jazz history.

By 1920, a dramatic shift in popular dance music away from dixieland style was well underway. Tailgate trombone playing, like dixieland music, became a nostalgic anachronism. Although players like Edwards, Ory, Brunis, and Palmer were all active throughout the 1920s, the tailgate style was no longer reflected in the current printed dance music. The “modern” trombone part of

the early 1920s was a more streamlined, elegant part. The countermelodies were less complicated and pitched in a higher register. By comparison, old style countermelodies were heavy and lumbering. They did not at all fit with the "modern" dance orchestras which were beginning to feature three saxophones. An interesting recording from 1920 by Ray Miller's Black and White Melody Boys captures the trombone in mid transformation.



*Photo courtesy of Wm. Russell*

T. Brown, 1938

The trombonist heard on the Miller titles "Rose of Spain" and "Can You Tell" was New Orleanian Tom Brown. On these titles Brown can be heard shifting from lead to countermelody, the latter much different from the earlier style of Eddie Edwards. Instead of hitting hard and square on the beat, Brown's playing is light, agile and smoother than that of Edwards. His sense of syncopation is less "raggy," his rhythmic figures tending to cross over the bar line, creating a more swing-like feel. A 1922 recording by the Oriole Orchestra (Russo and Fiorito's) entitled "Oriole Blues" features trombonist

Roy Maxon demonstrating further lightness and agility on the trombone. A 1924 recording by Jean Goldkette's Orchestra entitled "In The Evening" features briefly some slick "modern" jazz playing by brash young trombonist name Tommy Dorsey. Dorsey was at that time an ardent admirer of then preeminent modern jazz trombonist, Miff Mole.

As tailgate trombone playing gradually gave way to the "modern music" it became a particular applied style with roots equally

imbedded in the repertoire of turn-of-the-century band music and in the imaginations of its improvising pioneers.

Whether or not they could read music or were even aware of the various influences does not really matter, for they played the way they felt. As Georg Brunis put it, "It's all done by ear and heart."

— David Sager

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