

LONDON SESSION MUSICIANS PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE HENRY LOWTHER

INSTRUMENT TRUMPET

DATE OF INTERVIEW 27th February 2023

BORN 1941 Leicester

LOCATION City of Westminster Archive

INTERVIEWER Rozanne Gomes

PARENTS OCCUPATION Originally from a mining community in County Durham. Father served throughout WW2 and after the war undertook manual work.

The interview with Henry is lengthy and covers a number of aspects in addition to his work as a session musician. He has had a long and varied career and has managed to combine his life as a session musician with that as a live performer in his favourite medium of jazz. He even appeared at the original Woodstock! For the purpose of this project these notes relate to his times as a session musician although the listener will enjoy his further reminiscences of his wide career as a musician.

Henry begins by describing family life where his father and brothers played in salvation army bands. Other members of his family also played musical instruments. Surrounded by music he learned to play the cornet from 5 years old and from that early age he began to learn to read music. It was such an integral part of his life that he cannot recall formally learning to read.

He describes coming into the music profession 'sideways' in that he was not formally educated and never dreamed of becoming a professional musician as didn't think that he was good enough. He played in the pop group Manfred Mann 1965/66 after which he went back to his day job. He then managed to land a position with John Mayall in 1968 and from that time onwards became a full time professional musician. Henry explains that he really always wanted to play jazz live but it was impossible to make a living just out of live work so session work provided him with a sustainable income. Henry goes on to explain how he combined this with live work and some of the tensions involved.

He goes on to talk about the different studios in London which varied from Walthamstow town hall which was used for large orchestral sessions to the numerous small studios which were typically used for pop/rock sessions. He reflects on the change in studio atmosphere during the 50s/60s/70/s when the atmosphere became far more relaxed and laid back partly assisted by the emerging drug culture that prevailed. He also explains how for brass players the sessions changed in that they increasingly provided their parts through over dubbing at the end of the process rather than playing live in the studio with the band, which was less satisfying.

There is a very interesting section in the interview where Henry explains in the days before the mobile phone how musicians got work. He graphically explains the atmosphere in Archer Street where musicians would gather for work within the various pubs and when they closed would loiter in the street until they reopened. He takes the listener through the introduction of the telephone, answering machine, pagers and finally mobile phones and their respective roles in getting work. He also explains the role of specific musician answering services provided by specialist companies that effectively would run your diary.

Henry talks about the variety of session work that he undertook which includes pop/rock, film music and jingles. He also talks about the live work that supported popular television shows where there were live musicians in the studio e.g Parkinson and the role of the BBC studio in Maida Vale.

In terms of the skills and qualities required of a session musician in addition to the skills of being an excellent sight reader and being able to play across genres Henry discussed the need for tolerance, patience and broadmindedness. He explains how sessions can vary from those involving orchestras where all of the music is written and arranged where you 'just' turn up and play to the more laissez faire approach of some pop/rock artists where more creativity is expected which can lead to frustration and also tensions within the studio. Henry gives some examples and also gives his views on producers!

Henry identifies Lansdown, studio which was located in a basement under a block of flats in Holland Park as his favourite studio. He goes on to talk about the relationships with other musicians and the atmosphere that would exist between the musicians in the studio and how amongst the older musicians the socialising (drinking!) would often take place before, during and after the sessions! He contrasts that with the current day where studios are very strict regarding to the environment they expect within the studio.

Towards the end of the interview Henry explains the various means of remuneration and outlines the difficulties that can occur in cases where a session musician has stood in for a permanent member of the band and the consequent tension between the standard session rate and the potential royalties that could occur and illustrates this with a couple of examples. He also tells an amusing story in the early days of VAT and an encounter that a colleague had with a VAT inspector. Henry also explains the system of residuals and how this affected potential future earnings particularly in respect of film music.

Finally Henry reflects on the changes in recording brought about by technology, including the arrival of drum machines, synthesisers and also explains the role of library music. As a consequence there is less work and the working environment is completely different to the time when he was working regularly. His advice to any aspiring session musicians is to think again!

