

# “Listen Up!”

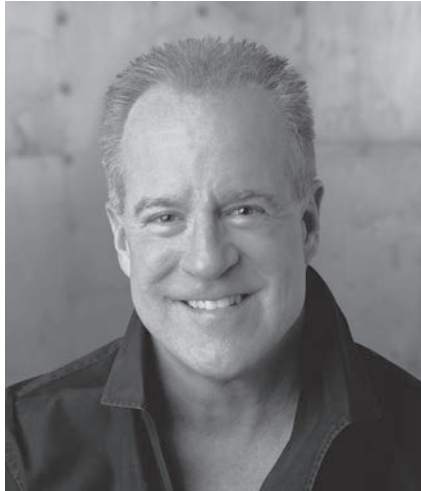
## Rock Star Trombonist James Pankow's Stories and Tips for Concert Band Musicians

~ Margie Simon

### Preface from Margie Simon (MS)

When I heard the iconic rock band, Chicago, in 2019 on the banks of the Mississippi River near St. Paul, Minn., they had been playing 52 years – with three original members. I wondered, “Do they still have it?” Then their first downbeat nearly catapulted me out of my seat—it was so synchronized and powerful—as was all that followed. Not what you’d expect from a group including three musicians in their 70’s. At the same time, their impeccable intonation had overtones ringing out all over, sounding like a 20-piece horn section, instead of three. Simply put: YES! They still have it. They were sensational. But Jimi Hendrix once said it best: “You guys have a horn section that sounds like one set of lungs.”

How’d they do it? I had to find out, because musicianship that amazing has lessons for all instrumentalists, whether in a rock band, jazz ensemble or a concert band. James (Jimmy) Pankow, their renowned trombonist, kindly granted an interview for ACB.



James Pankow  
Photo credit: Jimmy Katz

### MS:

Congratulations, Jimmy, on another couple great awards in 2020. Your International Trombone Association (ITA) Lifetime Achievement Award, and Chicago’s Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Of all your honors—a list too extensive for our story—which means the most to you?

### JP:

It would have to be the ITA Award. There’s no greater compliment than that from your peers. That is truly rewarding...But I guess when you’ve been around more than half a century...eventually, people might take notice. [He chuckles.]

### MS:

Let’s take it back to how you got started. It’s a fascinating story.

### JP:

My parents saw me respond to music as an infant. I would kick my feet and bob my head when music played. Growing up, my bedroom was over the kitchen. While doing homework before dinner, I’d drive my folks crazy tapping out rhythms on the floor with my feet. They’d pound on the ceiling with a broom to shut me up. But it was becoming increasingly obvious that a gift was blossoming.

At age 10, they took me to the local parish church basement where all the musical instruments were on display. I darted for the drums—there were 20 kids in line. My parents suggested we move along—so I headed for the guitar table. I felt I had to play something considered “cool” by my peers. Almost as many in that line.

The director, who played trumpet, walked over and took us to a table with no line—the trombone table. My parents and the director suggested I play that because there was no competition. “I had a much better shot to be first chair,” they said. I looked at it and said, “WHAT?? I’m not gonna play that sewer pipe!” But “might makes right,” so we headed home—trombone in hand—and the odyssey began.

And almost as soon, my dad, who had studied classical piano for 12 years as a boy and had a life-long love affair with jazz, would sit me down most evenings after dinner and we’d listen to his albums of great jazz artists. He even had recordings of JJ Johnson [world-renowned trombonist] he played for me—even though I sounded like a wounded elephant in the basement, at first. As I got older, dad took me to clubs to hear live jazz. Great music enveloped me, as did dad’s ever-present encouragement.

MS: WOW. What a start.

### JP:

Yes, but playing the first year or so was tough. My arm couldn’t reach down to sixth position, so I had to “cheat it.” I was doing the “calisthenics”: the arpeggios, scales, long tones, breathing, etc. But I struggled to coordinate my embouchure with my slide and my tonguing. I stuck with it because this gift was beginning to manifest. By two years or so, I started playing musical ideas in my head on the trom-

bone. I did have an accurate sense of pitch. Indeed, the real gift was the ‘ear’. I found the notes quite easily. Then it got fun. I even began playing bits of JJ Johnson’s record.

In seventh grade I got braces. With a sore mouth and bleeding inner lips, I was devastated. My director said,



Photo Credit: Todd Gustafson

“Jimmy, it’s up to you and how much you love that trombone. You can quit now and cut your losses, or work through it for two years and then sound amazing.” I stuck with it, but it was tough. Nothing says “hurt” like playing trombone with braces in a marching band. But when the braces came off, I was ecstatic. I couldn’t believe how much easier playing was—and no pain!

**MS:**

Worth it, indeed. When you attended Notre Dame High School, you had the legendary band director, Rev. George Wiskirchen C.S.C. [His book, *Developmental Techniques for the Jazz Ensemble Musician*, features a forward by jazz great Stan Kenton]. Tell us about your teacher.

**JP:**

Father George was cool. He directed all bands and was passionate about music. For years, our “Melodons” jazz band took first place in the Illinois stage band contest, also appearing as special guest at the Collegiate Jazz Festival at Notre Dame University. The concert band was superb, too. Father George demanded excellence, but he made it fun, too. After all, if it ain’t fun, why do it, right?

At jazz band rehearsals, he didn’t simply stand at a podium and conduct—he was up front bobbin’ and groovin’ wearing a short-sleeve shirt and black pants. (He wore the usual priest garments and collar in the regular classroom.) He was having as much fun as we were. He was really into it. When he corrected an articulation he would say, “It’s not doo-dat! It’s **DOOO-DAT.**” The music’s emotions, nuances and style were always paramount.

Father George insisted on practice. He also taught us how to listen—really listen to each other—as we played. That was—and is—so vital. Listening as you play is the key to good intonation, balance and synergy. You **HAVE** to listen. Because when you listen, you are paying attention—in the moment and in sync with fellow players—which you must be, to be tight. Listen, listen, listen.

Listen to your playing; listen to your section’s playing; listen to the full band’s playing. Are you in sync? Are you in tune? Are you blending? Are you articulating together? Are your attacks and releases together? Is your phrasing together? Are your dynamic changes together, or contrasting, as the music calls for? And, of course, listen to the director. **That’s the key to making great music together: You MUST listen, play with passion and have fun.**



*Chicago was inducted into the 2016 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. This was their first nomination. They’ve been eligible since 1994. A long time coming! Photo of late band member Terry Kath appears on the screen behind the band. The original band members who were at the ceremony were Robert Lamm, Lee Loughnane, Jimmy Pankow, Walt Parazaider, and Danny Seraphine. Peter Cetera was not there.*

Photo credit: Peter C. Pardini

[Fr. Wiskirchen’s precepts would guide Chicago the band for years to come.]

**MS:**

Father George arranged an audition for a full-ride trombone scholarship to Quincy College, 310 miles from Chicago. As a freshman, you composed a brass ensemble piece that was performed in concert. Nonetheless, you transferred to DePaul University in Chicago for your sophomore year. Why?

**JP:**

Over the summer I joined the union, put a band together and began getting decent gigs in the Chicago area. If I returned to Quincy, I’d have to forgo that. By transferring to DePaul, I could continue my education AND my band gigs.

**MS:**

At DePaul, things began to gel. Tell us about that.

**JP:**

I wood-shedded a LOT in the practice rooms every day. A face began peering through the practice room window, day after day. Finally, he knocked on the door and introduced himself saying, “WOW, man! I dig your playing.” Eventually he mentioned his idea of starting a band that would be different from any rock band around. The wind section would be an integral part, a **lead voice**—not just background behind vocals—and would I like to be part of it. [“He” was Walt Parazaider, a symphony-bound clarinet major accomplished enough to get an invitation to the Chicago

Symphony Orchestra. He also played sax and flute. And he loved playing in rock bands, too.] Sounded great to me. That was 1967.

**MS:**

Now living at home again, your dad continued to encourage you. Meanwhile, you decided to minor in piano so you could compose polyphonic music. You bought a turn-of-the-century Knabe upright piano and put it in a main floor hallway. One night you returned from a gig at 2:30 a.m. Tell us what happened next.

**JP:**

My dad was snoozin’ in his easy chair, and woke up when I walked in. I told him I’d love to talk, but I had class at 8:30 a.m. While getting ready for bed, all of a sudden I hear piano music—really jammin’, like Fats Domino stuff. Then I realize it’s not a record—it’s my dad—playing by ear! I knew he had studied classical piano,

## ... Pankow

but had no idea he could rock out and jam. I rushed downstairs and begged him to show me more! No wonder my dad encouraged me so. He was my strongest musical influence.

**MS:**

“The Big Thing,” the band’s first name [followed by “Chicago Transit Authority” and, ultimately, “Chicago”], played many gigs. But the Midwest audience wasn’t keen on your group’s original pieces. Your producer, James William Guercio (another DePaul student), suggested moving to LA, the heart of the recording industry. You all left DePaul and headed West. The band took off. Rock stars like Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and many others sang your praises. Chicago even toured with Joplin and Hendrix and was actually talking with Jimi about making a record together when he died. Tell us about performing in LA.

**JP:**

Our band really listened to each other as we played. So we played together, played musically and had good intonation. All the guys are blessed with really good ears—that helps—but we listen and adjust. We began packing the popular club, “Whisky-a-Go-Go,” and as Jimi said, we sounded like one set of lungs. We knew we were doing it right. We were also composing like crazy.

I remember writing “Colour My World” on the road in a hotel room in the middle of the night. At 3 a.m. I got Walt out of bed to try the flute part and see if it would work. He’s like, “Jimmy! It’s 3 a.m.!” He groaned, but obliged me. After he played it, I asked him if it was any good. He answered, “Any good? That flute part will make me famous.” [There were many other middle-of-the-night compositions that spawned platinum albums as well.]

**MS:**

Speaking of “Colour My World,” is it true Frank Sinatra heard it and asked if you would compose one more vocal verse so he could record it, and you said, “no”?

**JP:**



Photo credit: Peter C. Pardini

Yes. I’m probably the only composer that ever turned down Frank Sinatra, but I was married to the piece as it was. I struggled with such a huge opportunity, but changing the original almost felt sacrilegious.

**MS:**

So Chicago’s becoming a real hit. What next?

**JP:**

Eventually we toured the US. We recorded hit album after hit album. We toured Europe and proceeded to make rock band history.

**MS:**

And 54 years later, with tour dates in 2021, you are the only rock band in the world to have toured 54 consecutive years. Even the Rolling Stones can’t claim that.

**JP:**

It’s incredible. Yes, we’re a ‘well-oiled’ machine, and after all these years, we know each other’s chops so well that we can anticipate how bandmates will play a part—or vary it. And we can match that every time. That’s another reason we’re so tight.

But Covid has been devastating for everyone in this business. In 2020 we had a nearly sold-out year that we had to cancel or postpone. But our fans are so loyal that 85 percent of ticket holders asked to keep their tickets for our next tour. That’s why we love our fans, without whom none of our success could have happened.

**MS:**

That’s incredible. It’s very clear when Chicago performs that you all are having a blast. It’s a great lesson for ACB band members, some in their 80s. I hope they’ll see you having as much fun as the audience at a live performance. We all can—and should—have that much fun. Any parting advice for our ACB musicians and directors?

**JP:**

Pretty much what I said: Practice. Play with passion. Have fun. And listen, listen, listen!

**MS:**

Indeed, Chicago’s a band you have to see live to believe. If you want inspiration, check out <https://chicagotheband.com/> for tour dates.

Thanks so much, Jimmy, for sharing your musicianship and spellbinding stories with our readers. Now we all know why and how you sound so great, and how concert bands can improve their performances as well. Best of luck on your 2021 tour.

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*Margie Simon, writer and former band director, plays in the City of Lakes Community Band, Minneapolis, MN, and is an ACB member.*