

Jazz, Etc.

CHRIS GLASSMAN | EDITOR



Altin Sencalar in Budapest at Bela Bartok Concert Hall w/ The Dizzy Gillespie All Star Alumni Big Band

The Evolving Path of a Jazz Trombonist

The hustle in the music industry today can feel overwhelming, with constant pressure to adapt to a shifting musical economy.

By Altin Sencalar

[From the editor: Altin Sencalar is one of my closest musical colleagues and a source of aspiration and inspiration for me—and hopefully you, after reading a bit about his practice. Not only has he performed across the globe with legendary musicians, he also has a deep wealth of educational experience ... despite being under 35. Altin's entrepreneurship and tenacity are completely genuine and, as you'll see, he is constantly honing his skills and crafting his career as one of our generation's eminent trombonists. —Chris Glassman]

The career of a jazz trombonist has evolved tremendously since the first Original Jass Band recording in 1917, which featured trombonist Eddie Edwards. Nearly 110 years later, the landscape for jazz trombonists continues to shift, although the core themes of success have remained largely unchanged. Icons like Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Jack Teagarden, Helen Jones Woods, J.J. Johnson, Melba Liston, Curtis Fuller, Slide Hampton, Janice Robinson, Steve Davis, Steve Turre, Conrad Herwig, and modern figures such as Michael Dease, Natalie Cressman, Marshall Gilkes, Jennifer Krupa, Ryan Keberle, Melissa Gardner, Jennifer Wharton, Nick Finzer, and others have helped shape the paths of aspiring jazz trombonists.



Altin playing at Allianz Parque in Brazil

The careers of these jazz trombonists can be summed up in three key themes: frequent recordings, versatility as both leaders and collaborators, and staying active as composers and arrangers. Many of them also contribute to the future of the instrument through their roles as educators. Today's jazz trombonists, while facing a different environment than those before them, still adhere to these principles ... but with the added layer of modern tools and methods for outreach.

The Current Landscape

Today, jazz trombonists have more ways than ever to reach their audiences. In the past, musicians toured extensively, utilizing big bands and other band leaders for exposure. Now, social media, e-mail lists, and digital platforms offer new opportunities for visibility. Jazz trombonists often collaborate across genres, incorporating elements of Latin, funk, electronic, and world music.

We can be a part of many different new and classic ensembles. Other opportunities that are growing in our current landscape are nontraditional settings like multimedia and visual art during live shows. For instance, the Fulton Street Collective in Chicago functions as a co-op for visual artists who paint during performances—which completely changes the experience for both the artists and the audience.

The performance setting warrants new experiences as well. The use of live electronics is gaining popularity: Trombonists can do solo shows through a series of pedals and microphones routed through a pedal board and a “DAW” (digital audio workstation). This can create a specialized sound while allowing for fiscally leaner shows. However, be aware that taking this path could affect the scope of venues willing to hire you.

In a way, while the opportunities are abundant and creativity is unlimited, there are some social and common norms promoters and booking managers still follow. As a jazz

trombonist who has lived and worked in Texas, Michigan, New York City, and now, Colorado, I've encountered these challenges firsthand. The hustle in the music industry today can feel overwhelming, with constant pressure to adapt to a shifting musical economy. After completing my master's degree I, too, asked myself: *How do I carve out a space for myself in a world in which the paths to success are unclear?*

To provide you with a bit of guidance, here are some qualities that can help build a foundation for success as a jazz trombonist:

- **A high-quality recording with video.** In an era during which visual and audio media go hand in hand, presenting yourself with a polished recording and video can open many doors. It doesn't take a big production studio. Sometimes, it's as simple as using an iPhone with high-resolution video. Club promoters and booking agents often rely heavily on video when deciding whom to book, because it offers a quick and effective way to assess your sound, stage presence, and professionalism. This material is also essential for educators—especially in higher education, where search committees want to see and hear your musicianship in action. I find myself being able to book gigs and clinics and achieve more recognition with the music community as a result of having these videos. People recognize me more because of the videos I've made with my latest records.
- **A strong social media presence.** It's not about posting constantly but about creating a brand that highlights your unique approach to the instrument. Promoters and booking agents often check social media to gauge your following and engagement, which can influence whether you're seen as a draw for their venue or event. For educators, a strong digital presence also demonstrates your ability to connect with students

and navigate modern platforms—something that’s increasingly valuable in academic settings. Having a clear brand and personality online have acted as an “insurance policy” for me to reassure club promoters, educational institutions, and other people who hire me that I will announce and make sure I promote them and myself.

- **Effective communication.** The ability to respond promptly and professionally can make or break opportunities. Whether it’s through e-mail or phone calls, being someone who is flexible and easy to work with goes a long way in building a career. I can confidently say that anyone who contacts me directly will have a response within one hour via e-mail, phone call, or text. This quality has kept my relationships with people in a positive state, as well as playing often with different people and bands. Having this quality takes you from being a liability to being an asset to bandleaders and club promoters.
- **Mentorship.** Having *three* mentors, whether they are colleagues, professors, or established musicians, can provide guidance and varying support when the road gets tough. In my own journey, my mentors have continued to help me grow as a human, musician, educator, and leader. Each mentor can bring something different. For me, I have a nonmusical mentor, a musical mentor, and a life mentor. Each serves a different purpose in my life.
- **Resilience.** *This is perhaps the most important quality.* The road to success is filled with rejection, disappointment, and failure. I faced many setbacks along the way, including being denied entry to most of the undergraduate programs I auditioned for, but resilience is what kept me going. I also anticipate more failures to come—and I welcome that! Growth!

Setting Goals and Defining Your Path

I believe the best way to start *any* career is by establishing a framework of goals. For me, this meant creating a three-to-five-year plan that included “dream goals,” “big goals,” “next-step goals,” and “immediate satisfaction” goals. Yes, it’s easy to confuse dream goals with unattainable dreams, but I believe that with focus and persistence, what seems out of reach can become a reality.

When I graduated, my initial goals didn’t lead to the anticipated opportunities, such as a recording contract or a professorship in New York City. Instead, they led me to experiences that shaped my path in ways I didn’t foresee. The global shutdown in 2020 further derailed my original goals, but it also provided the space for me to explore new opportunities, like releasing music and pursuing educational roles in Texas.

The Pivot: Adjusting to New Realities

“Pivoting” is an essential skill for today’s jazz trombonists. In my

case, after graduating from Michigan State in 2019, my plans to move to New York City were disrupted by unforeseen events, including the pandemic. However, rather than abandoning my goals, I pivoted. I stayed in Texas, where I gained valuable experience teaching private lesson students, as well as students attending higher education institutions. I also began leading more performances and refining my craft as a bandleader.

The Texas years were crucial in shaping my career. I co-released an album in 2020, and those unexpected circumstances gave me time to focus on my composition and arranging skills. This led to my third record, *Reconnected*, which delved into my Turkish and Mexican roots and gave me a deeper appreciation for this setting. In turn, this experience expanded my musical vocabulary and prepared me for the next step in my career.

The New York Chapter: Realizing the Dream

In 2021, I was constantly visiting New York City, subletting and “couch surfing.” I moved to New York City with my family in June 2022, ready to seize the opportunities that I could find. Within hours of signing my lease, I began touring with Michael Bublé. After nearly six months on the road, the band downsized, and I found myself back at a crossroads. Even so, the valuable experience from my time in Texas allowed me to quickly adapt to living in New York City full-time.

Shortly after the downsizing, my career grew in unexpected ways. I became an endorsing artist for companies like Posi-Tone Records, Yamaha Music USA, Pickett Brass, and AEA Ribbon Microphones. These opportunities weren’t available to me in Texas, and I realized that my move to New York had opened doors that were previously closed. However, I couldn’t have afforded to move to New York without my time in Texas—a “Catch-22” scenario.

During this time, I also started a position as an adjunct professor at Iona University, which is located in the New York City area. My previous experience in teaching and performing across Texas helped me land this position, and it allowed me to continue playing at venues across the United States and internationally. As a member of the Iona College faculty, I was able to secure other master class opportunities across the country, as well as present at multiple music education conventions. This all led me to become a part of the faculty at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music’s Roots, Jazz, and American Music program (RJAM). Eventually, after five years as a collegiate educator, I was hired by Colorado University-Boulder, where I serve as Assistant Teaching Professor of Jazz Studies in the Thompson Jazz Studies Department. I also serve as a faculty member and administrator for the Jazz Institute at the Brevard Music Center, and most recently, I worked alongside the New York regional director for Jazz Empowers, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing jazz education into schools that don’t offer a jazz curriculum.

As I continued to develop my career, I began working with musical luminaries such as David Sanborn, the Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band, Mingus Big Band, and the Ulysses Owens



Altin recording session for Posi-Tone Records in NYC

Jr. Big Band. These collaborations, along with my growing portfolio of original recordings and compositions, allowed me to establish myself as a versatile artist in both performance and education. I believe a major reason these opportunities worked out is because of my time in Texas, when I had to deviate from my original plans.

Balancing Performance, Education, and Personal Growth

Today, besides teaching at CU Boulder, I continue to perform with various groups, both domestically and internationally. The balance between teaching and performing has been essential to my growth, and I'm grateful to be a part of an institution that is like-minded and also values the sustainability of a varied career. While teaching provides stability, it also helps me stay engaged with the next generation of trombonists, while my performances push me to keep evolving as a musician.

The most important lesson I've learned is that *there is no single, direct path to success in jazz trombone*. Every trombonist's journey is different, but many share similar challenges. In today's marketplace, the question isn't whether

you can be a great performer or educator; rather, it's how you can blend these roles to create a sustainable career. For me, balancing performance with teaching has been key. Each role feeds into the other, providing new opportunities for growth and exposure.

Last Thoughts

As jazz trombonists, we are fortunate to have a rich legacy from which to draw inspiration—starting with Eddie Edwards, Melba Liston, and J.J. Johnson, in addition to current voices like Michael Dease, Natalie Cressman, and others. However, today's trombonist must adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Whether you're just starting out or are well into your career, consider your goals and how you can shape them to fit the current landscape. The complexities of today's music world demand that you use your inevitable setbacks as learning opportunities, acknowledging that they're part of the process. Keep pushing forward, stay adaptable, and surround yourself with a community of mentors and collaborators. In the end, your unique voice as a jazz trombonist will emerge, just as it has for so many before you.

an effective demonstration of the idea of visual-art-inspired composition; a short, three-movement, serious chamber recital work with a visual element for recitals. This piece fills that void with grace and is a rare example of this sort of liaison.

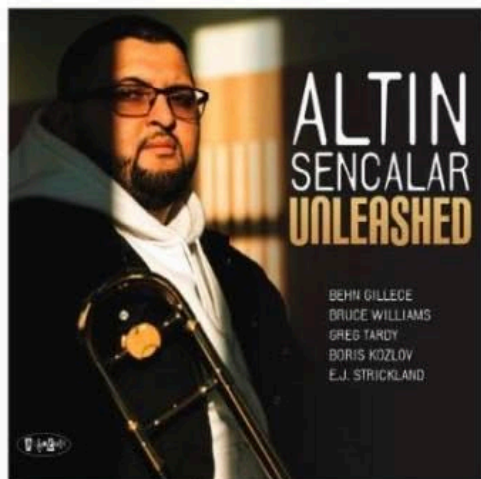
From Bach to Maria Schneider, to music inspired by African American churches around St. Louis, and New Orleans-style free improvisation, Pagano's arrangements have range, style, and abundant taste.

But here's the thing: While the playing is out-of-this-world chamber music for brass, the album is about much more than just "posaune posse perfectionism." *Confluence* is a love letter to what happens when you don't walk away after the gig—when you stay; when you build something together that's really art, not art-like.

Buy it. Put it on. Let it run. And don't be surprised if, by the end, you find yourself Googling "How to start a trombone quartet." You won't need to Google the why.

—Neal Bennett

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UNLEASHED

ALTIN SENCALAR, TROMBONE; Behn Gillice, vibraphone; Bruce Williams, alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute; Greg Tardy, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Boris Kozlov, bass; E.J. Strickland, drums

Posi-Tone Records (B0DTVSPSBX); Los Angeles, CA

Altin Sencalar: "Unleashed," "Obsession," "Forgiveness," "Set Adrift," "17 West," "Solid Gold," "Buenaventura," "Straight Street;" Sigmund Romberg: "Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise"; Altin Sencalar: "What's Next?"

Altin Sencalar's *Unleashed* is a raw, straight-ahead tour de force, reminding listeners that jazz is at its finest when presented without frills and gimmicks. In 10 tracks, Sencalar "swings for the fences" with a fearlessness matched only by his technical prowess on the trombone. This album constantly leaves the listener wondering, "What's next?" as the assembled musician's zigzag through unfussy compositions that leave ample room for the soloists and ensemble to shine.

The opening notes of the opening title track, "Unleashed," play like an invitation, Behn Gillice's vibraphone setting a mysterious tone before the ensemble launches into post-bop fury. There's a genuine sense this group is having an absolute blast as everyone ping-pongs musical ideas off each other. They respond quickly and decisively, highlighting the players' boldness. At such a fierce tempo, held down deftly by bassist Boris Kozlov and drummer E.J. Strickland, there's little room for second-guessing, and Sencalar takes full advantage of the firm foundation set by the rhythm section.

His playing on this track—and throughout—is an absolute delight. There's a high level of precision in his playing, but it never sounds robotic or stiff. Sencalar is most certainly a technician, but it's the passion with which he uses his gifts in a variety of musical settings that truly stands out.

"17 West" pays homage to the New Orleans roots of jazz and features terrific playing from clarinetist Greg Tardy. It's a nice change to hear such a traditional groove augmented with modern harmonic sensibilities. Tardy weaves through the changes as the rhythm section dances around his playful improvisation and Sencalar shows off his stylistic range on the track, adding bluesy grit to his pristine sound.

Kudos to Altin Sencalar and all the musicians for capturing the spontaneous magic of live jazz.

—Victor Sawyer

Memphis Jazz Workshop