

interiors

BALLY



Marsh WOODWINDS

THE HIGH ART OF **Funk**

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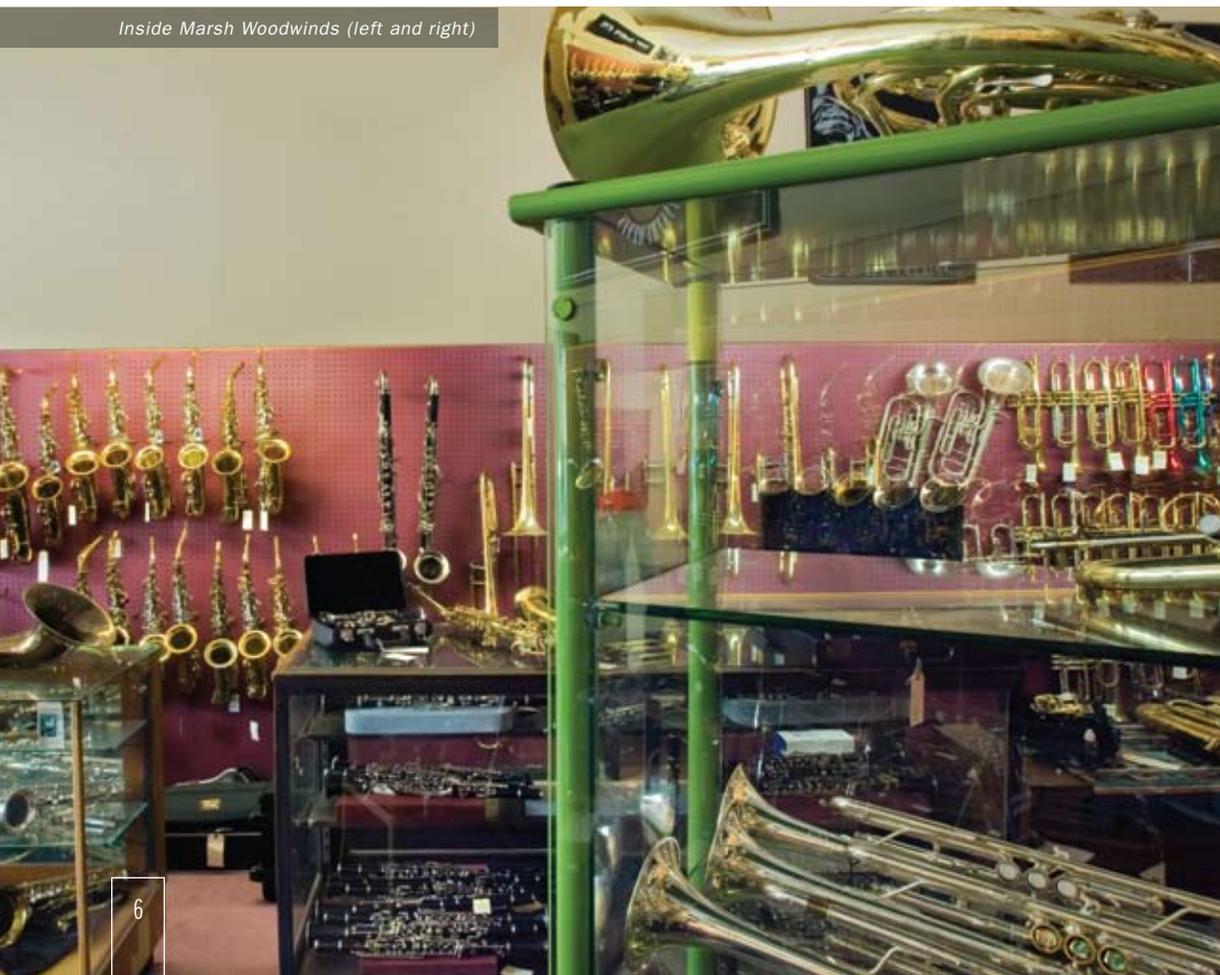
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No one walks into Marsh Woodwinds without smiling. This is remarkable because many customers arrive at the shop on Person Street in Raleigh, just a few doors down from Krispy Kreme, in a state of high anxiety over an instrument in need of repair. Others may be worried about having enough money to finance a new horn. Once in the shop, though, anxiety quickly gives way to a sense of wonder. It doesn't take long for customers to realize that they have entered a fanciful, bizarre space where art and “funktion” combine to create a unique workplace.

The impression that you may have stumbled into a flea market or an antique store belies the fact that Marsh Woodwinds is actually a place of craftsmanship and business. Musicians from the far reaches of North Carolina, and other states as well, frequent the shop. According to saxophonist and Navy School of Music Instructor Greg Dudienski who resides in Virginia Beach, Marsh Woodwinds is “the best woodwind shop on the East coast, bar none.” This is high praise because everyone who knows anything about musicians knows that they are very particular about the “feel” and response of their horn. So when the instrument is not working right, a musician is off to the repairman with the same urgency a parent rushes a sick child to the doctor. A musician will not trust his “baby” to just anyone. It does not matter that the repair may involve the simple twisting of a screw or a drop of oil. The musician, like the parent, needs reassurance that everything is going to be all right. A good relationship with a repairman is an essential part of a performer's support network.

The repairman of choice in North Carolina and environs is Rodney Marsh, a largely self-taught musician with a degree in sociology from North Carolina State University, who also happens to be a highly respected jazz player. Rodney certainly looks the part, often sporting a beret atop longish, ungoverned hair. Looking younger than his years, he has that

Inside Marsh Woodwinds (left and right)



slightly disheveled, devil-may-care appearance of someone hell-bent to express himself freely, but coolly. When working at his bench, he dons coke-bottle thick spectacles that give him a professorial appearance.

Rodney taught himself how to repair instruments and started a small business from his home in 1976. He opened his first formal store on New Bern Avenue in 1984, then moved to Hillsborough Street in 1990, and since 2007, has occupied the space on Person Street. Along with his associates, jazz musicians Bruce Melkowitz and Peter Lamb, he has managed to maintain an independent local business in an age of mega-stores and franchise ownership.

Rodney is self-effacing concerning his own accomplishments, but is fiercely independent, and anyone who knows him would not be surprised that he would resist formal training in any field. About his early start in music he told me, “I didn’t take lessons because I didn’t want anyone to make me play what I didn’t want to play. I was afraid it would take away the fun for me. I would have made a terrible music student, and actually, I’ve never thought of myself as a musician.” This is strange talk indeed from one so highly regarded as a jazz flutist and saxophonist.

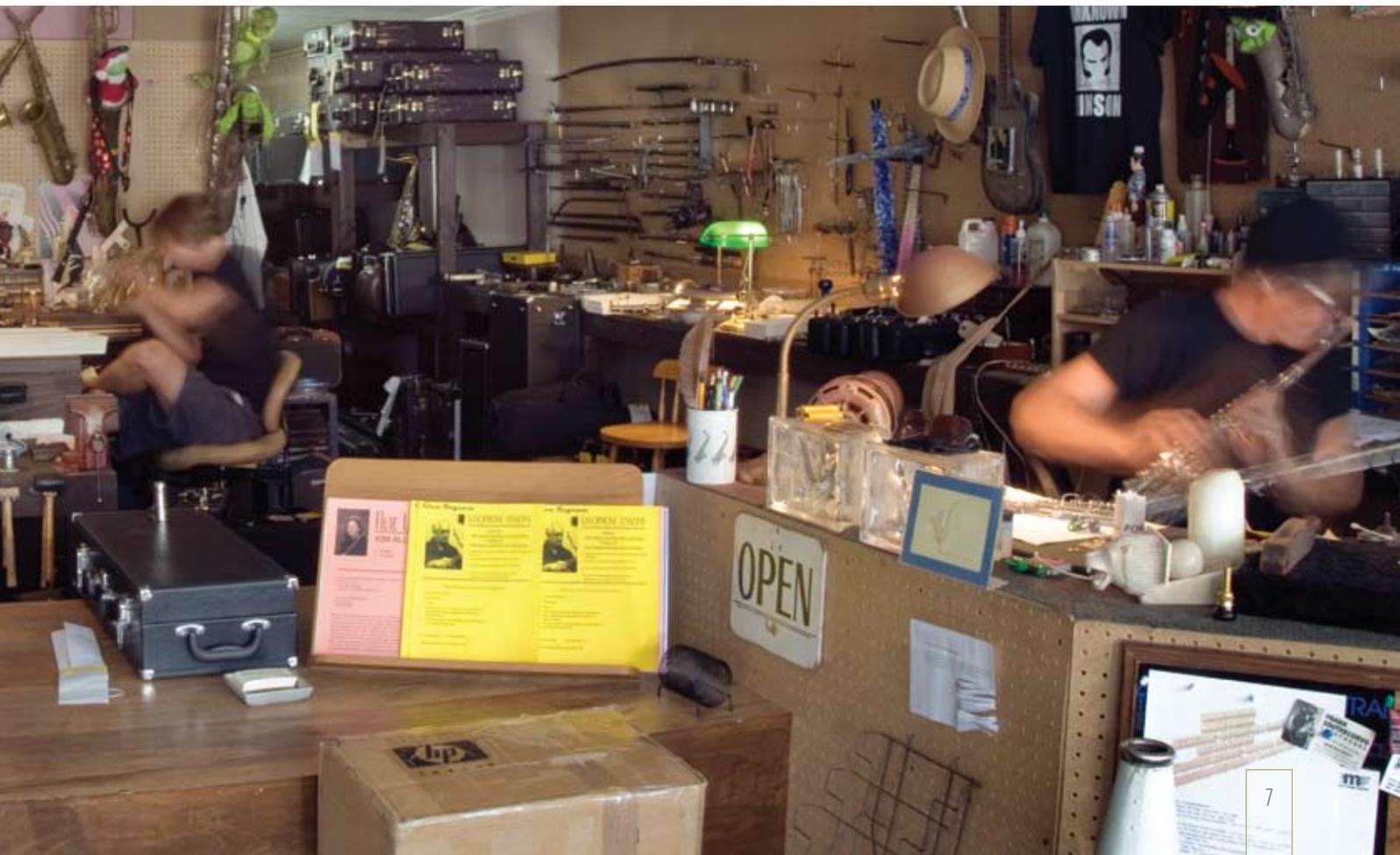
There is a laid-back atmosphere at the shop that reflects the image of the jazz musician – hip, cool, and almost nonchalant. The shop appears so improvisatory that you just know the owner is not a classical musician. Classical musicians, who spend much of their lives practicing to “get all the notes on the page,” would never arrange things in such a seemingly

random fashion. But, like a great jazz solo, there is structure and discipline underlying the appearance of chaos.

Perhaps the most unusual thing about the shop from a business perspective is that the repair side of the store is up front, which makes it possible for the customer to see the work as it is being done. Traditionally, repairmen occupy the dark recesses in the back of the store. Being out of public view suits many craftsmen who prefer to protect the secrets of their trade. At Marsh Woodwinds, however, Rodney, Bruce, and Peter can be seen performing their craft in view of anyone who walks in the store. Here is where repair becomes a “performance art,” which can cause a great deal of anxiety for the customer. As mentioned earlier, players are very protective of their instrument, so it can be very disconcerting to watch someone operate on your horn. How would you like to watch while the doctor performs surgery on your child?

Placing the repair shop at the front of the store also poses safety issues, potentially dangerous for the unwary customer. Several years ago, in the bleak of winter, University of North Carolina Professor of Clarinet Don Oehler had a near-death experience when his scarf got caught in a grinding wheel operated by Rodney. Luckily Rodney stopped the wheel before Don was garroted. Afterward, Don was very clear that he had no desire to reenact the death of Isadora Duncan!

The space Rodney occupies is as unique as his style of doing business. The present location was formerly a bridal shop. Unlike most owners who have to spend months renovating a space before they open for business, the guys at Marsh



...far, far away from corporate

Woodwinds simply swept the floors and moved in. Rodney has always adapted his working area to the existing configuration of the building. Regardless of the amount of space, Rodney fills it. Each of his previous shops were so crammed with stuff that he had to make a choice; take a few truckloads to the dump, or move it all to a larger building. Rodney chose to move to a larger building roomy enough to hold almost everything he has collected since 1976.

A visitor could spend hours exploring the many small worlds that exist within the shop, much like exploring a museum. The store is decorated exclusively with used items found at flea markets and thrift stores. Almost everything is recycled from the past. It is a neat freak's nightmare, or a pack rat's heaven. Each large room is divided into mini-areas featuring items arranged consistent with their function – an embodiment of the art of “funk-shway.”

There are several sitting areas throughout the store showcasing period furniture, like a pair of starkly elegant leather chairs from the fifties with blond wooden arms. At the front of the repair shop are four club chairs arranged in a circle where patrons can relax and enjoy a cup of espresso, á la Rodney. As if to emphasize that this is an area to relax, the sign on the wall says “NO PRACTICE ZONE.”

Usually music is playing in the store – mostly jazz on vinyl. Rodney's collection of 5,000 records lines part of one long wall and extends into the next room. The collection encompasses the entire history of jazz, including many rare,

one-of-a-kind recordings by obscure artists. No matter how esoteric or off-beat a recording is, Rodney probably has it. It is possible to visit the store over a period of years and never hear the same recording twice.

Just around the corner in a niche where the store computer (the one concession Rodney has made to modernity) is located, one can see a perfect example of how the juxtaposition of objects can yield an artistic result. A small toy dog strikes a playful pose in the midst of a stack of skulls, a threatening monster, and a cobra rearing up, ready to strike. Yipping, bopping, and weaving about, the puppy is oblivious to the dangers surrounding him. We are left to wonder how long the sinister creatures will tolerate his playful overtures. The presence of the Roadrunner of cartoon fame adds a comical element to the setting, suggesting perhaps that there are a few who will always be able to escape evil.

Strolling through the retail side of the store there are rows of pearly accordions, and instruments on display in magnificent showcases from the '50s. Jarringly, there is a bust of Beethoven sporting a golden plastic crown hanging so severely askew that one wonders whether we have caught the master in the midst of a drunken party. One imagines that if Beethoven had attended a party the music may have come from the garishly bright jukebox standing nearby. And nearer the front is the *pièce de résistance*, Rodney's signature display, a phalanx of saxophones lining the wall like sentinels ready to sound the alarm.

Upstairs is yet another world. The largest room is arranged as a recital hall. There is a comfortably large stage equipped

Left to right: Rodney Marsh, Bruce Melkowitz and Peter Lamb



Upstairs, a performance space



America, cookie-cutter neighborhoods, and the mall.

with a sound system. Jazz combos have performed here, but the space is also intimate enough for chamber music. In addition to concerts, a variety of events could be held here, such as meetings or master classes. This is one of the few performance spaces available in the Triangle area which offers audiences an opportunity to see and hear music-making up close.

The adjacent room functions as a gathering place for friends after hours. The space is definitely “musician chic” and looks like a restaurant, complete with a well-stocked bar. Friends can sit at the bar or at tables and talk politics, catch up on gossip, and listen to music. Of course the walls are festooned with offerings from area flea markets, and there are several items of clothing displayed that were formerly owned by patrons.

Marsh Woodwinds always draws a crowd. Musicians of every ilk and level of attainment frequent the store on a regular basis. Young people especially love it because everything about the store is “so cool.” And cool it is! Where else can you hang out and hear some very hip banter between musicians, listen to great records, see instruments being repaired, and make contact with established professional players?

With the shop constantly abuzz, and Rodney always being distracted by customers who want to talk, one is naturally curious as to when the work actually gets done. Not surprisingly, the answer is, after hours. That’s why Rodney has his own living quarters, a second home of sorts, at the back of the store. Indeed all the comforts of home abound in this space: bed, bathroom, sitting area, and a completely appointed kitchen.

The style is “thrift store provincial,” which would not suit everyone’s taste, but to Rodney, it makes for the perfect pad. Often Rodney works in the shop late at night. Instead of going to his home, he simply sleeps at the store. Most people can’t wait to get away from work at the close of business everyday. Not Rodney. At the end of the day, friends often drop by for drinks and convivial conversation. After they “split,” Rodney goes back to the kitchen and fixes himself a meal. During dinner he watches a movie on his VCR. (As you might have guessed, a DVD player is out of the question because it smacks of newness.) After the movie, he usually goes to sleep. Then, around 1am, he wakes up and works in the shop for the rest of the night. Here is a man who is passionate about his work; so much so, that he has defied every recommendation for healthy living made by health care professionals.

Marsh Woodwinds is a world unto itself, a separate reality. Functionally, it is a music store. On another level, it is a museum filled with artifacts recalling a bygone era. There is a consistency to all this because woodwind instruments themselves represent technologies developed during the 18th and 19th centuries. Rodney Marsh has created a unique space for people to do business and interact socially. It is extraordinary that Rodney spends most of his life inside this space, ensconced in a world of his own creation – far, far away from corporate America, cookie-cutter neighborhoods, and the mall.

More of Michael Zirkle’s great photos of Marsh Woodwinds can be found at www.ncsymphony.org. Click on Image Gallery.



Rodney’s back-of-the-shop kitchen

