

# A Lesson With Herbert L. Clarke

By: CLAUDE GORDON

My first lesson with **Herbert L. Clarke** was when I was 19 years of age. I started to learn to play, however, when I was 5 years old.

My father was a fine clarinet soloist with the Bands of the Souza era and my Mother, a concert Pianist. They presented me with a Cornet. My Dad showed me how to hold it, how to blow, he said, "Take a big breath and Blow." How to finger it and taught me the notes of the staff. From that day on, I practiced out of the **Arban Book** all day long—every day.

All of my Brothers and Sisters played instruments, and as a result we had an orchestra within the family, playing for hotels and radio stations of that time.

I started to play professionally when I was 8 years old, and played fairly well for a youngster, having a playable range from low F# to high F above high C. The best thing that I remember is that I never worried about playing, nor did I worry about analyzing what I was doing. I just practiced and could not wait to get a chance to play for an audience.

At 13 years of age, I had a Radio show of 15 minutes of Cornet solos with piano accompaniment every Wednesday evening.

This history is by no means complete, but meant only to show that there were no playing problems or worries, things just worked as I practiced all the time. **Until** I decided I should study with a teacher if I intended to be a successful player. This changed everything. I was taught things that I had never heard of before. Hold the Corners tight, stick out your jaw, push out your stomach, blow from the diaphragm etc., etc.: All of the theories became endless. I started to worry. I did not have a playable High F anymore. I started to look in mirrors, (what for, I never found out). I then of course made my second big mistake. I started looking up all of the best players and asking questions. This started years of more misery and confusion than I ever dreamed possible, when doing something that you are supposed to enjoy. This in turn led to hunt for the magic mouthpiece that has never existed. For ten more years I limped along professionally, very frustrated and at 18 years of age I was not playing as well as I did at 8 years old.

My Dad told me wonderful stories about **H.L. Clarke**, and I played his records continuously. Finally I decided to leave my home in Montana and travel to meet **H.L. Clarke**, who was in Long Beach, Calif. If he couldn't help me, what was I going to do?

These were depression days and believe me it was a difficult task.

I went right to his home and rang the bell. What a thrill!!! Here I was talking to the great **H.L. Clarke**. He invited me in and I was awed by his kindness, gentleness and interest. A complete opposite of some of the players I had met.

He asked a few questions and we sat and talked for some time. This **interview** was the best **lesson** I had never imagined and I came away confident that I could be a successful player. At one point in our discussion I thought all hope was gone. I asked if he could make me a great player. His answer was a prompt, **NO**. He let that sink in (to my despair) and then said, "But I can show you how!!!" This was typical of Clarke. If you only discussed 5 minutes, you would learn a lot.

My first lesson was the following Monday morning. I was staying at a hotel in Hollywood and had to leave my watch with the gas station in order to get gasoline to drive for the lesson.

I was quite nervous when Mr. Clarke asked me to take out my horn and play. When I had finished there was a moment silence and then I heard **HRUMPH!!!** Then he said, "You never took a correct breath in your life." (Wow, after all those years of pushing out the stomach as I was told by other players and teacher.) He then explained how that the power is generated from the Chest muscles and gave me exercises to work on, to develop this. He explained the importance of good health to the player, that brass playing is a form of athletics.

My embouchure placement was terrible. I was playing completely on the lower red of the upper lip. Actually I'd had so many different embouchures during those early years that I could play anywhere on my mouth.

He suggested that I place it higher. He then thoroughly explained that the lips only function is to vibrate. However there must be enough lip in the mouthpiece to vibrate. Then I was hung-up on no-pressure playing. He then explained **very patiently** that there is no such thing as no-pressure, and to stay away from a mirror.

This fact is especially interesting when today it is said that Clarke started the no-pressure System of playing. **HE DID NOT!!!** I recently read an article that stated that **H.L. Clarke** used to hang his horn from a string and practice that way. This is absolutely not true!!! Never did he advocate such a ridiculous method. He was demonstrating that a developed player could play with great ease and lightness and demonstrated by hanging the horn from a string and playing up to top notes.

He told me later that he was sorry he did this, as everyone got the wrong idea and it went like wildfire across the country. Supposedly a new no-pressure method.

I was playing on a so-called high-note mouthpiece which was blocking every effort to improve. He said, "Let me see that mouthpiece and then stated, you'd better get rid of that and learn on a sensible mouthpiece." The next lesson (like so many students) I still had it. Clarke said, "Give me that mouthpiece and promptly threw it out of the window. He then rummaged into a drawer and handed me a mouthpiece and said: "Here play this." Believe me, I never questioned him. (It was a "Heim #1") I played this for years. I eventually went to a cup and Back bore like like Clarke and that is the size I play to this day. He explained: "The search for a mouthpiece is the beginning of the end."

He taught me very forcefully that you must put air through the horn. We were working on Study #1 of his Technical Studies. I was playing timidly and trying to play super-soft. (Isn't that what the Book says?) Finally he stopped and shouted: "Will you put some air through that Horn!!!" He then knocked me flat. When I got back on my feet, he knocked me down again. Each time I got up he knocked me down, all around the large room where he taught. When he finally stopped, he shouted: "Now thats the way you play that thing and don't you forget it!!!"

He then thoroughly explained how you must whip all fear from your system.

He Said: "Everyone that picks up a trumpet has a yellow streak around his back a mile wide. You tell a man that and he wants to fight. That makes him twice as yellow because he wants to protect his yellowness."

It was several years later that we started to put some finishing touches on Technical Studies and I could eventually take #1 up to Top F 16 repeats each in one breath in a whisper. That was when he explained that you don't put the roof on a house until the foundation and sides are up.



It would take many books to record all that I learned from **H.L. Clarke**, truly the greatest of all teachers and still today the greatest and most respected name of all the soloists even though he has been dead for 37 years. He taught with parables and had proverbs for everything. As a result I never forgot all these wonderful things. Even in his late sixty's and early 70's he would demonstrate amazing feats. He played double High C and Triple High C at the turn of the century, however he never abused or over used his ability. His sound was big and velvet and yet he could cover an entire band with his power. He was never known to tire out, and no one has ever topped his technique.

I thought that I had developed a fast single tongue. I could do 16th notes at  $\text{♩}144$  on the metronome, for a solid minute. Clarke could do the same closer to  $\text{♩}180$ .

While with Clarke, we went through Arbans page by page. We went through **Saint Jacomes**, page by page. That was when he taught me the value of understanding what the author meant. "Get the sense of it," he said. Understand what the exercise is for and use it **correctly**. Practice every model and then see how many more you can make. That's how he explained that it's (How You Practice, What you Practice and When You Practice, that makes you successful). We thoroughly studied many wonderful works besides such as **Gatti**, **Walter Smith** and so many more that I couldn't list them all.

Some time back a high school professor, upon **looking** through one of my books asked: "Upon what authority did you write this?" I answered simply; "With Clarke I gained 50

years of Arbans experience; 50 years of Saint Jacomes experience, 50 years of H.L. Clarke's experience and 50 years of my own. (Including 40 years teaching experience). All adding up to 200 years of experience. **That is my authority**. He didn't answer.

Clarke constantly expounded; "**Don't stop where I did—go farther**" In all of the years that I associated with him, I never heard him say an unkind word about anyone. This was not a weakness, but rather a sign of his great strength. When you studied with him, believe me, this rubbed off on you.

He would always point to the abilities of another great artist. He would talk, for example, about how **Liberati** had great control of his tongue, and what a great artist Kryl was. In this manner he taught you to appreciate other artists, rather than putting all of the attention on yourself, and to appreciate the work of others to gain their standing in this profession.

I have talked with those that said they took a few lessons from Clarke. Taking a few lessons is far different than studying. To study, takes a length of time. A player does not need many teachers. **He needs only one good one.**

I owe my successful career to **Herbert L. Clarke**. I studied many years and looked to him as a second Dad. He taught me how to play; how to think and reason; and how to teach. I had the chance to tell him how much I appreciated what he had done for me. True to his Nature, he answered: "I've done nothing; You have done it all."



# A Lesson With Claude Gordon

BY: CARL LEACH JR.

1st TRUMPET FLAMINGO HOTEL: LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

When I was asked to write this article, I immediately searched for and found a cassette tape of my first lesson with **Claude Gordon**.

I played the tape to help re-experience that very important point in time for me. I was 24 and it was August 1972. Throughout my school days I had been first chair in most bands that I played. I had no lessons as such, but had a fairly good knack for playing. In 1966 while performing with a college Jazz Band, in a festival of bands. I was heard by **Stan Kenton** (one of the adjudicators for the event) and about a month later I was traveling with him in his Orchestra. It was a great experience!! I was able to meet many well known musicians and talk with them. As I traveled, in each city, there were many trumpet players always eagerly waiting before and after concerts to ask any number of questions concerning playing. This was my first realization of how neurotic Brass players can be. Some would bring their mouthpieces and ask me (as if I was an "authority"), can this mouthpiece play a High G, etc.; I guess at first that I was rather naive to them, because my reply was "It seems to be fine, if it has a hole all the way through." After months of unending questions, I started my spiral downward. I began thinking (my biggest mistake) about all these things, like back-pressure, upstream, pivot, air velocity, jaw forward, etc. **BOY!! NEUROTIC BRASS PLAYERS ARE CONTAGIOUS!!** If I had a bad night or could not hit my top note I started to panic. My next mistake was asking "Authorities" what to do. You would not believe the vast array of solutions. My playing started getting very hard and no fun at all. Next I was drafted in 1968 and played with an Army Band till completion of my service in 1971. At this time I was so unhappy with my playing that I quit and sold my instruments. I figured that I had better go to school and try some other vocation. Soon I had the "Bug" and thought I would make one last attempt at Trumpet. I searched for and found a great teacher and player who had just tried out himself a fairly new book on Brass playing, that he said made a lot of sense. It was **Claude Gordon**: "Systematic Approach for Brass Players just by reading exactly what was in the book, my teacher guided me through. I started to feel so much better and stable that after completing the book I decided to take from Claude. (I was lucky, he lived in the same State.)

I was living in San Francisco Bay Area and would drive once a month to Los Angeles for my lesson. On my first lesson I was extremely nervous but in a matter of a few minutes, felt like Claude was a dear Friend I had known for years.

He started by explaining the 7 points in Brass playing. He demonstrated how to take a breath and blow properly. Keeping the chest up (Good Posture) and taking a full comfortable breath. Everything was common sense—NATURAL.

Next we started on Lesson 2 in "Systematic Approach for Brass Players," and Claude demonstrated how to hold long last note, so that the muscles that blew air are exercised. I had always thought I knew how to do this right, but when Claude held the note, he did it at least 5 times longer than I ever did. I realized that things have to be done completely to achieved maximum results.

Following that we went to the proper playing of pedal notes. As explained in his book, he stressed dropping the jaw and blowing or the playing of pedals are a waste of time. With his patience I soon had the idea. Claude showed me how pedals would sound after a lot of practicing. It sounded like he was playing a baritone horn. Big and Full!!!



We then played the Range Study in Lesson 2. Claude made sure I had the idea of the tongue and air working together. I was so inspired with his constant guidance that I played higher than I had ever played in my life. The next thing that Claude did was to write out some special flexibility routines for my particular needs. Then we ended with Clarke's Technical Studies#1.

My lesson lasted almost 2 hours, and is typical of a first lesson with Claude. He is incredibly thorough and makes sure you get everything understood before you walk out the door.

I recall on the Third lesson that I was determined to get Claude to play something so I could hear how he played. He had just gotten up when I arrived and he was still tired from teaching late the previous night. When we got to Clarke's #3 Etude, I bought my plan. Looking back I see how ridiculous it was, but I had to get him to play. Claude knew what I was doing, but he said, "Alright, get my Horn", I raced over to the corner of the room and opened the case. The Horn and mouthpiece were very cold. **WHAT A TEST!!!** Little sleep, cold horn and no warm-up. Claude licked the mouthpiece and said, "This doesn't feel good." Then he took a big breath and played the Etude so fast and with zero mistakes, I dropped my jaw in amazement. I know he wasn't practicing this Etude, waiting for me to have him play it. It dawned on me that this man had forgotten more than I was ever going to find out on trumpet playing. When he was done, he looked at me over his glasses and said, "Any Questions?" The words I uttered can't be printed here, but I was starting to realize how great a **GREAT PLAYER REALLY IS.**

Years later we were working on playing light on Clarke's #1. When Claude played the first line I had to walk over and put my head in the bell of his horn to hear each note. I found this rather funny because a College teacher I knew said that in the **Claude Gordon "Method"** you only blast. This is typical of mis-informed people. If they criticize the Claude Gordon "Method", they also criticize **Schlossberg, St. Jacques, Arban Gatti, Colin, Smith, Clark, Charlier, Maxime Alphonse, Irons, Harris** and on and on. These are the books he uses!!! It is not the "Claude Gordon Method" but a Systematic Approach. That is Claude's Genius. Knowing what these great players were doing and applying it to the needs of the student. If he needed some exercises for a certain problem and could not find it in the many books, he would create the necessary exercise. Sometimes it required only an alteration of existing routines.



One day at the first Claude Gordon Brass Camp, I was listening to Claude practice. He was working on a new flexibility exercise that was added to some "Irons" studies. They sounded great and (Thank God), he called me in to listen to them. He played four Glissandos on the end of each finger pattern (123-13-23-12-1-2-0) from Low C to High C—then E then G and Double C. Later on when he had worked out the procedure, he gave me the C. At that time I felt I was done with these particular routines, but Claude wanted me to use them a little longer. He said there was a certain thing that he was waiting to hear that would indicate the study had served its purpose. At 8 months I was complaining that I'd had enough of these exercises and I was going crazy if he didn't get me off soon. Claude calmly listened to my protests, but urged that I continue a little longer. I GAVE IN!!! Then about 2 weeks later something snapped. The study became easier than I dreamed possible. From that point on I was able to consistently play range Studies above Double C (something that had eluded me for years.) Thank Heavens, Claude had my interest in mind when he kept me on those studies I NEEDED. He knew what I had to have to overcome my next barrier and he stuck with it!!!

After that I never questioned the direction of exercise or if an exercise was repeated.

Looking back I was never given a lesson that overwhelmed me but just ahead of me enough to make me work to master it.

During the many years that I studied with Claude, I learned from my questions and my personal lessons how to help other Trumpet players. It is really fun taking the mystery out of Brass Playing. Showing young students the way everything works and then letting them get down to the business of practicing (the hard part), creates fantastic results. Claude and I have spent a lot of time together. Each time I have learned some new thing and have been inspired by this Man. I only wish more Brass Players could have the privilege of taking a lesson with **Claude Gordon**.

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**1st TRUMPET: FLAMINGO HOTEL, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**

## CLAUDE GORDON

While playing first trumpet for **Ray Charles** in 1974, a tumor developed on my lower lip in the exact spot where I play. After an examination by a leading physician in New York, I was scheduled for surgery. A week following the surgical removal of the tumor, the doctor told me he also had to cut out some of the surrounding tissue etc. He also mentioned that my lip would be numb for the rest of my life and that I would never again play trumpet.

Upon hearing this less than cheery news, I returned to L.A. and started getting my "piano chops" together. Two months later, while hanging out with a friend, I picked up my horn and tried to play. Finally a note came out.

The next day I called **Claude Gordon** and related the above story to him. In all the years I've known him, since 1958, I'd never heard him raise his voice til now. "Is that doctor a trumpet player?" he thundered. I told him that he wasn't. Following a few well chosen flowery phrases, Claude rather sternly "invited" me to his studio for a consultation and lesson.

Three hours after my arrival at Claude's, I was playing A

above high C. Finally a smile graced the familiar, now friendly, face of C.G. He wrote out a set of routines and told me to come back in two weeks.

Two weeks later, I returned for another three hour lesson. Apparently his advice and instruction once again did the trick, because one month later I was invited by **Louis Prima** to join his group as a featured artist.

Upon Louis' death, I went on to appear and be featured with **Raquel Welch, Lou Rawls, Barry White** and others.

During my travels, I've encountered brassmen in Japan, Europe and South America as well as in this country who not only employ the C.G. method, but have told me all about the "trumpet player C.G. raised from the dead." Invariably this leads to a good laugh when they find out that I'm that trumpet player!

Obviously my debt of gratitude to Mr. Gordon is immeasurable. All I can say about this method is "Go for it!"

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