

# Vincent DeRosa



To celebrate the 100th birthday of the recording legend, **Chris Parkes** talked to Vince's daughter **Betty DeRosa** and his colleague and biographer **Todd Miller** to find out more about this incredible man

**T**he chances are that most people in the world have heard Vince DeRosa play the horn at some point. A large percentage of those people will have been moved, excited, relaxed or even terrified by the experience. So a conservative estimate is that, over the last 85 or so years, several billion people have had their lives enriched by the playing of DeRosa, probably many times. So, how do you distill the career of the most heard and recorded horn player of all time into a few pages? An

entire 2000-word article would not be enough even to list his greatest hits and collaborations, from *E.T.* to *Singin' in the Rain*, from Frank Sinatra to Frank Zappa, from Miles to Mancini. So all we can do is talk to the right people, listen to the right music and bring ourselves one step closer to this incredible musician, celebrating his 100th birthday in the process. And to explore. What was it that made Alfred Newman bring him to 20th Century Fox? What made Sinatra sit on the "sidewalk" outside the



studio, waiting for Vince to arrive before recording sessions?

Born on 5th October 1920, DeRosa grew up in a musical household, his father a professional clarinetist and his mother a singer. In 1932 the family moved to Los Angeles. By this time, Vincent had been playing the horn for a year or two so it was fortunate that his uncle, Vincent DeRubertis, was a professional horn player in L.A., on contract at Paramount Studios. Many of the film studios had full orchestras on contract at that time, such was the volume of movies being made and the explosion of the orchestral film score. Tragedy struck on 4th July 1935 with the death of his father, John DeRosa. Only 14 at the time, the young Vincent accelerated his studies and begun playing professionally in 1935 at the age of 15. "He knew he had to step up and support his mother and siblings," says Betty DeRosa, daughter of Vince. Betty's childhood was filled with encounters with the brightest stars of stage and screen as she and her family followed Vince around the studios of Los Angeles – but we'll come to that! When asked about her father's formative years, she says, "Alfred Brain was a big part of his life - kind of a mentor." For me, Dennis Brain and Vince DeRosa have always been connected by a way of phrasing and articulating that communicates a line as well as any singer. The sounds are quite different but you can feel and hear fundamental similarities in the way they controlled the air, the way they made articulation into diction, even the way they felt music. I didn't know of this link between Vince DeRosa and Alfred Brain, Dennis's uncle, who moved to the United States in 1923 and, via the New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics, ended up playing first horn in the 20th Century Fox Orchestra under Alfred Newman. So it's no stretch to say that the Brain brothers, Alfred and Aubrey, were key to the development of not just Dennis Brain and Vince DeRosa, but also horn playing in general on both sides of the Atlantic. As an aside, the huge volume of incredible work in DeRosa's career shows just how much we lost with the early death of Dennis Brain. They were born just a few months apart but Brain died over 60 years ago. All the more reason to celebrate DeRosa's 3500 movies, countless records and collaborations with the biggest artists of the day.

Betty remembers her childhood with great fondness and pride at her father's achievements. I was itching to get onto the subject

of the many recordings Vince did with Sinatra. These are the records that made me fall in love with his playing. "Frank was really sweet to me! My dad had told him that I wanted to sing - I was only 7 or 8 at the time. He asked Frank if he could get an autograph sometime. The next day a car arrived outside. A man got out and ran up to the house, presenting me with an autograph and photo from Frank Sinatra. He wanted dad on



L-R Bill Hinshaw, Richard Perissi, Jack Cave, Vincent DeRosa

everything." He got it too, with Vince appearing on dozens of sessions, the first of which was in 1946 - the last was in 1983! (The fantastic book *Put Your Dreams Away* lists all the details and personnel of every session Sinatra ever did, compiled by Luiz Carlos do Nascimento Silva. Vince makes as many appearances as anyone.) Any session where he wasn't present would lead Sinatra to ask, "Where's Vince?" When Betty went to see Sinatra in Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas years later, she slipped a note through the singer's entourage, saying she was Vince's daughter. He had her and her friends moved, front and centre, near his own family! Of all the wonderful moments that Vince contributed to Sinatra's catalogue, there is one song that sticks out and that I often play to people to demonstrate how much can be done with so little. The song "Oh, how I miss you tonight", from the album *All Alone*, contains several tiny four-note solos which fill the gaps in Sinatra's vocal line. The control, articulation, tone, and feeling he conveys in each of these is worth a hundred listens. (My book tells me it was take 3, recorded between 8 and 11pm on Wednesday 17th January 1962. The other horns were Richard Perissi and John Cave, godfather to Betty DeRosa.)

It clearly wasn't just Sinatra who heard these qualities in DeRosa. The great film composers and arrangers often wrote just for Vince. Mancini used him whenever possible, most famously on the score of the movie *Days of Wine and Roses*. The theme is well known and begins with a beautiful horn solo. The rest of the score is a gem, littered with pockets of DeRosa's magic throughout. An hour well spent for any horn player. John Williams referred to him as "one of the greatest instrumentalists of his generation" whose contribution to American music "can't be overstated". The score of *E.T.* is possibly my favourite film score. The closing 15 minutes of the film are accompanied by one of Hollywood's greatest soundtracks. Listen to "Escape/Chase/Saying Goodbye" just before the end credits, and you'll have an understanding of what John Williams was talking about! A lot



of the Sinatra stuff was arranged by the great Nelson Riddle, who often wrote specifically for Vince. Billy May also featured him in his silky-smooth horn writing on the fantastic *Billy May's Big Fat Brass*.

Often, film and TV sessions would take place during the day, interspersed with jingles, before records were made in the evenings. "It was possible then, because there was hardly any traffic. You could do a session in the morning, drive across town for a jingle at lunch, back across town for the afternoon session, then off to make a record in the evening! Of course, you never knew what was going to be on the stand when you got there," says Todd Miller, longtime friend of Vince's and fellow horn player on the Los Angeles scene. Todd worked with Vince for decades. "I was in awe of him in the early days. But anytime you worked with him, you just played better! His musicianship made it easier." Asked about his focus and how he dealt with constant red light, Todd was effusive. "He was never ruffled. He had such focus. And people wrote for *him*! So it was much



harder than it would otherwise have been." Similarly, nobody I spoke to could ever remember him suffering a bad patch. "He practised a lot when he was very young," says Betty. "He was never one to party. He was always up early and always practised." Maybe this had something to do with what Alfred Brain once said to him: "Never practise on the stage".

During Vince's early career, which was broken up by a period playing in the California Army Air Corps during the World War Two, brass playing exploded, scaling new heights in every way. Vince was, along with other giants such as trumpet player Uan Rasey, key to this. The composers writing for them were as gifted as any in the world. Max Steiner, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Alfred Newman and many others had together created the sound we now think of as "film music". Increasingly demanding writing for these gifted musicians led to the stakes being raised for everyone.

Away from the recording studios, Vince became a respected and trusted colleague and was heavily involved in the musicians' strikes of the 1950s, standing up for the rights of his colleagues. As Betty remembers, "He was so tight with the guys. They called him the Godfather! He always wanted to help people. They wanted him to become head of the union but he didn't have the time." Luckily he still had time to teach, mentoring many fantastic horn players who would go on to play in Hollywood and beyond, teaching at the University of Southern California for 40 years. One person who looked to DeRosa for advice was a young Todd Miller. "The first time I met Vince was only for a brief period when he gave me advice on how to fix my horn. Our paths began crossing again when I started doing recording sessions while I was in school. Of course, working with him was life-changing for me as for so many others. Through the years as I witnessed his incredible value, both as an artist and a teacher, I felt that his career and life should be documented. Because of this, (and with a fair amount of trepidation) I set out to write *Carved in Stone* to immortalise his life and career. I took a sabbatical to start writing. It actually took years to complete because of our schedules. We spent a lot of time on it. The only argument we had was that I wanted to include a list of everything he played on. It would've been a lot of extra pages but so worth it. The information is out there but he didn't want it - he wasn't keen on celebrating himself! So we stuck with just some highlights." I'm sure I'm not alone in hoping that list makes it into the second edition of *Carved in Stone*, Todd's book about Vince's life and career.



I tentatively asked Betty how she ever got to see her dad when he was so busy. "We often went with him to the studios, so we'd hear what he was working on. So we saw a lot of people. Everyone wanted dad." And, with Vince so revered, were others competitive, fighting to be number one in Los Angeles? Vince was eventually the first-call horn player all over town, not just in 20th Century Fox. Betty dismisses the idea. "Everyone wanted to be friends with him. He was really funny too!"

It's easy to imagine these superstars as just having some natural talent that was simply there from the start. However, all accounts point to serious amounts of practice and an incredible work ethic. "He always had the best high register, and a production and sound that couldn't be matched," says Todd Miller. "And he played up there every day. But he wanted a better low register too. He went to Louis Maggio (more well known to trumpet players for his trumpet method, which also includes exercises for horn) to work on this and ended up with the best low register too!" There was also a lot of music around during his childhood - there are accounts of him helping his father choose clarinet reeds as a child, listening intently to the sound

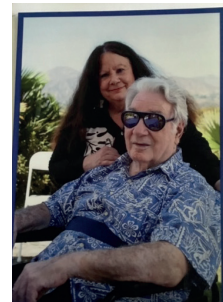


of each one and proclaiming, “that’s the one for you, Dad!”

There are too many other names and credits to mention here but DeRosa can be heard on albums from Doris Day, Sammy Davis Jr., Mel Tormé, Stan Kenton, Ella Fitzgerald and countless others. He played at the Academy Awards ceremonies every year, from the first televised ceremony in 1957 into this century, and was still playing on *The Simpsons* in the 1990s. Did Vince have favourites? Todd Miller was there in the studios enough with him to find out. “Of course he loved to work with Sinatra, but he didn’t have favourites. No matter who the composer or arranger was, he treated it with respect and gave everything to it. He didn’t go to so many concerts because he was so immersed in music all the time.” Those close to him are also reluctant to choose their favourite work of Vince’s, perhaps due to the overwhelming amount of incredible records to which he contributed. One album which does crop up again and again is “The Intimate Bach”, on which DeRosa plays duets with the guitarist Laurindo Almeida. I only found this one on LP (it’s in the post, along with Todd’s book!). This is a rare opportunity to hear DeRosa playing in such a small, chamber music setting. The album was nominated for a Grammy award.

The current pandemic has meant that 100th birthday celebrations were kept to a minimum, although there are countless people who wished they could have been there with Vince,

Betty and the family. I will have spent a couple of hours on 5th October just listening to his records. It’s his birthday but what a gift we’ve received from him – countless hours of incredible horn playing, musicianship and collaboration on record for us to spend the rest of our lives exploring and enjoying. Here’s to you, Vince! **CP**



Betty and Vince

So that you can listen to the great man playing, Chris has created a Spotify playlist called “Vincent DeRosa Playlist”. It includes all the music mentioned in the article, favourites from his family and some of Chris’s personal choices.



Photos courtesy of Betty DeRosa and Carlos Romero

## Carved in Stone by Todd Miller

*Carved In Stone* documents the life, career, and playing and teaching techniques of horn player Vincent DeRosa, the world-renowned recording artist. DeRosa has had an astounding career that spans seven decades. He is undoubtedly the most recorded horn player ever, as well as one of the most respected.

The book is divided into four sections:

- A review of DeRosa’s personal life.
- DeRosa’s career (including a historical perspective of the Los Angeles recording industry and his impact and influence on it).
- A concise and direct description and analysis of his playing and teaching methods including insights into both technique and musicianship.

- Appendices, exercises, and photographs

This book is the result of a number of years of research including over 60 interviews with DeRosa, his colleagues, and former students, as well as numerous print resources. It should provide invaluable information to all brass instrumentalists, not just horn players.

*Carved in Stone* is an extraordinary and well-deserved tribute to Vincent DeRosa and his contributions to the music world.

