After my two years with Condon I got a job in the fall of 1957 working with Bobby Hackett at the Henry Hudson Hotel. The hotel was adjacent to the Colisseum, a large new convention center on 57th Street, which had just opened. The hotel management, sensing the opportunity to revive their fading fortunes, decided to open up a long-unused ballroom with a dinner and dancing policy. Hackett, who had been working on staff at WABC in comparative anonymity, had suddenly shot into the spotlight with the success of Jackie Gleason’s "Music for Lovers" record. The album, which featured Bobby’s horn over a background of syrupy strings, was the biggest selling LP ever released at that time, with the result that Bobby, who since the late 1930s had been a well-known name in the jazz world, was now a pop star.

In 1939 the Rockwell-O’Keefe organization had decided to launch Bobby in the role of bandleader. He gathered together all his old pals, Eddie Condon, Pee Wee Russell, Brad Gowans, George Wettling and Max Kaminsky. From a musical point of view, they were good choices, but business-wise, he was just asking for trouble. All these guys, including Bobby himself, were some of the hardest drinkers in the world of jazz. The band was totally disorganized, a financial disaster. Glenn Miller came to Bobby’s rescue by giving him a job in his band on guitar. Glenn used to give Bobby $50 spending money each week, and the rest went to paying off the debts; it was hard living on 50 bucks, but it did get Bobby out of hot water. He also got opportunities to play comet with the band. On one occasion, when they were playing at some small-town dance-hall, the ballroom manager came up to Glenn and said, “If you don’t stop the guitarist fooling around with that bugle, I swear I’ll fire the whole goddam band.”

Bobby was a lovely man, a very gentle soul who had nothing bad to say about anybody. Even when a friend, exasperated by his perpetual good nature, asked him what he thought about Adolf Hitler, Bobby paused for a moment and replied in his deep voice, “Well, you gotta admit he was the best in his line.” (!) He had a zany sense of humor, a funny way of looking at life, but also a definite paranoid streak. The two great dangers as far as he was concerned were the Mafia and Communism. He always used to refer to the New York Times as the “Uptown Daily Worker.” For many years he was afraid to visit Europe because it was too close to Russia and the Communists. He was a New Englander by birth, born in Providence, Rhode Island, and the one place he loved more than
anywhere else was Cape Cod. He always had a dream of setting up a deal whereby he would have the house band at one of the places on the Cape and never again have to leave. Unfortunately, he was not a good businessman. He always seemed to get in with the wrong partners; inevitably things went wrong and Bobby would have to go back on the road to retrieve his fortunes.

He was a small, frail man, and he had to gear his playing to his physical limitations. Although he worshiped Louis Armstrong, he just didn’t have the physical strength to play a trumpet with Louis’s big, commanding sound, so he played it in a very gentle way. It was a small sound in person, limited in volume, but on record it sounded big and fat. There was a unique fluidity to his playing and, coupled with his flawless harmonic ear, it enabled him to flow in and out of the changes with amazing ease and grace. I found that playing with Bobby was a whole learning process—he was a teacher without knowing it. A consummate musician who paid meticulous attention to all the details in the music, the subtleties of harmony and the little melodic twists, he believed in respecting the composer’s intentions. He used to say, “The guy wrote it this way and that’s the way we oughta play it. Before you make your own variations give the people the original version.” He certainly taught me to respect the song I was playing.

The band Bobby led at the Voyager Room in the Henry Hudson Hotel in 1956-7 was an interesting one. Instead of a string bass it had John Dengler on tuba and bass saxophone. John walked up and down the tuba like a four-in-a-bar bass, and he was very good at it, able to grab a breath without destroying the line. There was a lot of doubling in that band. As well as the two previously mentioned instruments, John played a quite respectable cornet. Dick Cary was the pianist and doubled on trumpet and peck horn, a small version of the baritone horn in the tuba family. Ernie Caceres, the great baritone sax player, doubled on clarinet, and Tommy Gwaltney, who was basically a vibraphone player, also doubled on clarinet. Throw in Bobby Hackett’s trumpet and there was a tremendous capacity for different sounds, allied to very adventurous writing by Dick Cary. When everybody was playing their horn doubles in a concerted ensemble, drummer Buzzy Drootin had his work cut out keeping the rhythm going. I was the replacement for Tommy Gwaltney, who left to work at a club in Washington. It was not until after Bobby had offered me the job, and I had accepted, that he sprung on me the fact that I would have to play vibes. I hadn’t really appreciated just how important the vibraphone sound was to Bobby—he wanted it in place of strings for the ballads. When I told him I’d never played the instrument, he told me not to worry and suggested I take a few lessons from Freddy Albright, one of the top percussionists in New York. It was a crash-course which taught me the bare essentials, just enough to scrape by. With Freddy I was studying on a full regulation keyboard, and when Tommy left he naturally took his vibes with him. The only vibraphone available for me was one belonging to Dengler, who prided himself on having at least one of practically every instrument ever invented. Whereas the usual vibraphone goes down to F below middle C, John’s had a cut-down keyboard that ended on middle C. On the opening night I was playing this unfamiliar instrument. We were on the air and I