

**Las Vegas Sun**

PEOPLE IN THE ARTS:

# Richard McGee: Conductor, trombonist

**Another weekly snapshot of creative people living in the  
Las Vegas Valley**



Steve Marcus

Richard McGee, conductor and trombone player, takes a moment Monday to chat with students outside the Artemus W. Ham Concert Hall on the UNLV campus.

By [Kristen Peterson](#) ([contact](#))

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**Name:** Richard McGee, musician

**Age:** 55

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in music education and master's in orchestra conducting, University of Denver; doctorate in higher education administration, UNLV.

**Gigs:** McGee is chairman of the department of fine arts at the College of Southern Nevada. He's associate conductor and educational coordinator of the Las Vegas Philharmonic and music director of Nevada Pops.

**Playing trombone:** McGee was 8 years old when he saw "The Music Man" on television. You could say it shaped his life. He was particularly interested in the musical's song "Seventy-Six Trombones" and was playing the instrument the following year. By the time he was a junior in high school, McGee knew he wanted a music career. He gave up plans to study geology, started practicing more and never looked back.

**Getting to Vegas:** He spent five years teaching high school band in Colorado before deciding to play music professionally. He practiced hard, "got his chops back" and took a road trip that brought him through Las Vegas. He fell in love with the city. Soon after, he, his wife, Joan, and their 10-month-old baby moved to Vegas. They arrived in 1981.

**Working Vegas:** He started out at the Celebrity Room at the old MGM Grand, then moved over to "Folies Bergere" at the Tropicana, where he was lead trombonist and assistant conductor for eight years. In 1987 he formed the Nevada Symphony Wind Ensemble.

The 1989 music strike was unsuccessful and hotels replaced musicians with taped music. That year McGee was hired at CSN to form and lead a concert band. About that time he started filling in with the Caesars Palace house orchestra, backing stars such as Tony Bennett, Natalie Cole, Burt Bacharach and Johnny Mathis.

**Musicians in Vegas:** Until the 1989 musicians strike, Las Vegas employed lots of musicians. McGee, accompanied by his wife and two sons, walked the picket line with the rest of them, but the hotels won out and many switched to taped music.

"It was a landmark event for Las Vegas entertainment. We thought we were indispensable. Others didn't. But with Cirque and Broadway shows we're seeing more work for musicians than we have since the strike. Las Vegas was and still is the best place to be a professional musician."

**Culture in Vegas:** "We're doing better, but we're still behind other towns of this size in terms of music organizations. A lot of people moved here because we wanted to get something from Vegas — a job, a house, to play my horn. Nobody wanted to stay here, and I think every young city goes through that."

**Nevada Pops:** McGee launched Nevada Pops, a sort of revival of his Nevada Symphony Wind Ensemble, last year. The organization presents a variety of concerts. Its first concert of this season (Sept. 4) features jazz standards. A concert band will present a Halloween-themed concert in October. A string and choral concert of movie music is planned for spring.

"It's going to be really different from concert to concert. That's what I like. I have a short attention span. When I listen to jazz I say, 'this is my favorite music in the world.' When I listen to concert I say, 'this is my favorite music in the world.' When conducting an orchestra I say, 'this is my favorite music in the world.' "

**Other interests:** Sports cars, hi-fi electronics, hiking, stream fishing.

**Sticking around?** "We're not going anywhere. I really do love Las Vegas and I feel like I owe it something. There's nothing I've wanted to do in music that I haven't been able to do here. I've been able to do everything I've ever dreamed of."