

# SOONER SPOTLIGHT ● IRV WAGNER

Teacher, scholar, performer, showman extraordinary, Dr. Irvin L. Wagner is Mr. Entertainment at the University of Oklahoma. One moment he is the dignified, black-tied symphony conductor or the international authority on the fine points of early trombone music. The next moment he is bouncing onto the podium to take charge of the Sooner Scandals orchestra, resplendent in a glittering gold satin shirt that would make Liberace weep.

His talented Trombone Choir can be in the midst of a performance ranging from Bach to Bacharach, and Wagner will whip out his musical spoons. Shedding a shoe and sock, he will hold his trombone in one hand, play the spoons off his head with the other, while working the trombone slide with his toes.

In short, nothing Irv Wagner does can surprise the Sooner audiences who have become his devoted fans during his 13 years at OU.

The effervescent Irv outdid himself last summer, however, by maneuvering his touring 35-member vocal and instrumental ensemble into Vatican City to play for Pope John Paul II.

Wagner and his ensemble were performing in St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice last August when a Monsignor Patrizio suggested that they try to play for the pope during their stay in Rome. Acting on the monsignor's instructions, Wagner talked his way past the Swiss guards and knocked on Vatican doors until he reached the pope's personal secretary. Although initially cool to the idea, the secretary finally advised Wagner to bring his group with their instruments to a small, intimate gathering of 100,000 in St. Peter's Square for the pope's weekly audience where they could take their chances.

As the pope mingled with the crowd, he joined a Polish travel group in singing a folk song, then headed toward the strategically placed OU musicians, who struck up "Sing Praises to God," "Deep River" and "Ave Maria." The pope stopped to listen, chatted with Wagner and encouraged the Oklahomans to take photographs. Wagner recalls that as the pontiff started to walk away, he



*Pope John Paul II chats with Wagner after hearing the OU student ensemble.*

paused to look back and repeated a heavily accented, "Oklahoma."

That Irv Wagner should chat with the pope or compare musical spoon techniques with fellow enthusiast Doc Severinsen is not surprising. Irv is not unaccustomed to the spotlight, and he has never known a stranger. In addition to his teaching duties and his world travels as president of the International Trombone Association, Wagner is in constant demand to organize and participate in musical groups for events on campus and throughout the state.

His Trombone Choir represented OU and the state as part of Oklahoma's "Bicentennial Day" celebration in concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in 1976. More recently he led the parade into Governor George Nigh's inaugural ball with 77 high school trombonists, one from each county in the state, playing — you guessed it — "Seventy-Six Trombones." Wagner is also a frequent conductor and musical arranger for the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra's Pops Concerts and

plays with the Ice Capades orchestra at annual appearances at the Oklahoma State Fair.

In the 12 years since he took over the Sooner Scandals orchestra, Wagner has transformed simple musical accompaniment into a major part of the show, doing all the arrangements for the student variety show himself. His spectacular shirts (he adds a new creation to his wardrobe for each year's production) are a highlight of the evening.

Wagner on trombone, assistant fine arts dean Jim Faulconer at the piano and OU piano technician Don Stephens on bass are the nucleus of a faculty jazz combo which has provided musical entertainment for a variety of OU events for several years. The combo is also a vehicle for Wagner's famous musical spoon routines.

A self-taught spoon virtuoso since high school, Wagner takes his musical sideline seriously, insisting with a smile that "It's an art." But he admits that it's a crowd pleaser as well — and Irv Wagner knows all about pleasing crowds.